

THE LABYRINTH
OF LIFE
By E.A.U. VALENTINE



Q.P. ~~Ed~~
75

THE LABYRINTH OF LIFE

THE LABYRINTH OF LIFE

BY

E. A. U. VALENTINE

AUTHOR OF "HECLA SANDWITH"



NEW YORK
E. P. DUTTON & COMPANY
31 West Twenty-Third Street
1912

All Rights Reserved

TO
MY COUSINS
EDWARD AND ELIZABETH PHELPS
THIS BOOK
IS AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED

2138779 .

CONTENTS

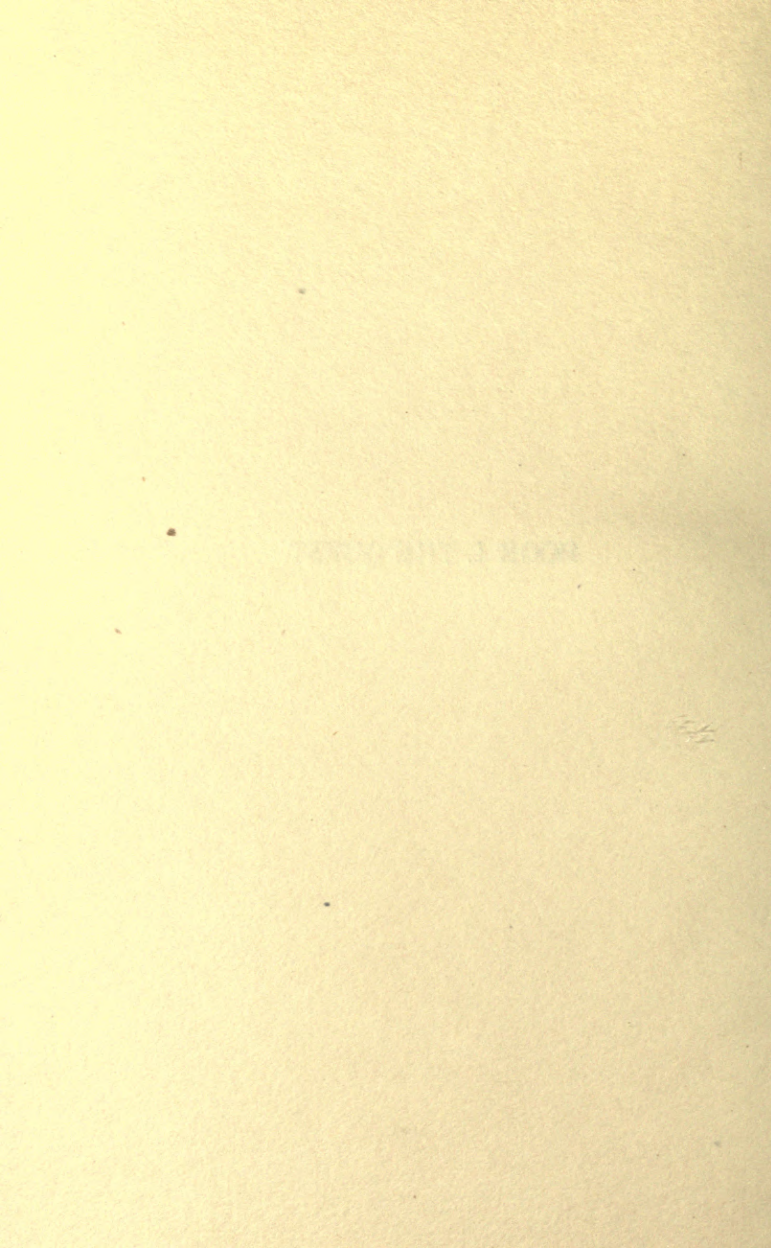
BOOK I

THE QUEST 3

BOOK II

THE TEST 235

BOOK I. THE QUEST



THE LABYRINTH OF LIFE

Book I: The Quest

CHAPTER I

As Harding turned into the Champs Elysées, he felt, as it were, the exhilaration of a convalescent released from a sick-room. It was a bright May afternoon, and the embowered thoroughfare, in all the glory of its fresh greenness, tingled with the flood of passing vehicles, the steady rhythm broken by the pretentious snort of motors, the jingle of bells, and the presto tune of saddle horses, woven together into a medley of sound that fell on the young man's ears like a pæan of the world. The sidewalks were crowded with people afoot or occupying bench and hired chair. It seemed that all Paris was abroad enjoying the sunshine like ephemera breaking from winter cocoons. In the rumour and animation of the scene was that note of the pageantry and joy of living which the French metropolis most expresses in its high-scaled nervousness, and which at the same time excites and devitalizes its inhabitants. To Harding it had the elating effect of novel experience—this Paris in first flush of springtime, full of flooding white light enveloping middle distances in soft iridescence like the bloom of a Tanagra vase,

that made the horizon, as one got it, guarded by the stately Arc, a wonder of melting purple. It was all of a curious sensitive poetry that appealed to lately dormant things in him; and he felt it lighten his mental languor like wine, as his eye caught the gamut of greens overhead, the beauty of the chestnuts opulently loaded with plummy clusters, and then returned to his fellow promenaders, whose faces wore such an air of personal greeting, as though springtime created a general bond.

The last week or so had been a gradual realization of the Paris his ignorance had pictured in advance and that he had almost ceased to accept, in default of a favouring season. He had arrived, for the first time, the previous autumn, after the poplars by the river banks had dropped premature leaves, and there had followed a particularly disagreeable, dragged-out winter, the humid chill of which had searched his blood with the fine insinuation of a surgeon's lancet. His nature was acutely barometrical, and it clouded sadly under the melancholy of overcast skies and leaden rainfall. It seemed always raining here. In the depression it caused him, he called Paris the City of Dreadful Day. Paris, apparently, was always wrapped in mists grey as the legendary ones of Ultima Thule. And how brief and uncertain the pale sun—a viscid glimmer quickly lost in melancholy, greedy nights, where the blar street lamps glowed like phosphorescent eyes of sea monsters behind aquarium panes.

It had been rather dreary, his last half-year of Paris, in spite of the friends he had made, the attraction of

art galleries—for he was fond of pictures—the theatres, the cafés. He had often resorted to the last, in fits of depression, when he meant, instead, to spend the evening in work. If he was disappointed in the climate of Paris, he was as much disappointed with what Paris had so far done for him artistically. He had expected marvels from merely breathing its air. He had meant it to be an escape from old disheartening conditions; it was to have been the goal of new, serious achievements. Alas, he had counted too much on foreign environment—too much on that, as perhaps he had counted too little on himself, on the hampering effect of a temperament easily lowered and bent aside by mood and accident. He blamed the constant slant of dirty rain against the prospects revealed by the Bohemian quarter on the Seine where he had taken lodgings. He had told himself, when he found this out-of-the-way coign with the balconied windows and its near glimpse of Notre Dame, that the lovely, neglected site should typify the seriousness of his spiritual vistas. The silhouette of the Cathedral that he loved, almost casting its shadow on his labours, was it not meant to bless and inspire? It was all part of the dreamed-of “sea-change” of soul and sense he had counted on in crossing the ocean. But had there been any redeeming change in him? Any of that happiness of a nature released, warmed, made to feel itself and its best powers, the happiness over things he longed for and always secretly doubted the ability to attain, which had made him eager to grasp

the staff of adventure, to wander, shift environment, *live* . . . and he told himself that he had never really lived, only "existed" in the whilom ambients. It was the realization that he was still his old self, would probably always be his old self, which heightened the melancholy that had oppressed him during the dull winter just passed. But . . . Spring was come, and surely one could trust to the inspiration it sent like a wave though the veins. Spring could make a poet of any one. Not that he wanted to be a poet any more, but, in a way, it meant what he did want.

Harding was on his way to take tea with Miss Julia Vanderhurst, whose telegram, blue as his winter moods, informed him of her arrival in Paris. He was fond of her, in a way, and she had ladened him with unused letters of introduction to people in Paris, when he sailed from New York. Her invitation for four-thirty, at her hotel, was an excuse for his idle afternoon. He knew he owed her the courtesy, and the weather encouraged the duty. But now that he had left his lodgings, was abroad in the eloquent sunlight, he felt a growing disinclination to keep his appointment. She would, he knew, put awkward questions to him, and he was in no mood to account for himself—was not sure that he could account for himself in the kind of particulars which interested her. Besides, her worldly vivacities, representing effort of mental variance, loomed as a bore when he wished to give himself to the spirit of irresponsibility filling the world. Moved by a whim to wear a token of his springlike

temper, he stopped at a flowercart, pushed up against the side-walk, and picked out a bunch of violets, that the vendor—a hardy cheeked dame of the Halles—fastened in his lapel with a motherly air that was part of the general feeling of kindness animating the world.

He strolled on, savouring the bright aspects of the parade. Leaving the sidewalk, after a while, he explored the shadier retreats of its neighbouring parterres, charming with the taste of Parisian gardening, where flamed flowering rhododendrons—masses of pink and mauve. Birds piped their pastorals, indifferent to the proximity of human life. A butterfly flitted across his path . . . soul of Parisian coquette returned to earth? How everybody seemed to have yielded to the spell of weather! Harding felt the appeal of life mount within him. For once he had the sense of being an attuned instrument, adjusted to the casual, joyous touch of things. It was good to be young still, to have delusive dreams, to fancy that there was before him a future worth anticipating.

Crossing the avenue, by aid of its little oases, he gained the hotel at which Miss Vanderhurst was staying. He directed his steps to the tea room. A throng of over-dressed worldlings were pouring into the great glass-domed corridor, and securing the innumerable small tables that attendants, in scarlet waistcoats and black satin shorts, pushed about to suit the caprice of patrons. The place was noisy as a rookery. Throaty voices of British tourists blent with the American upper register, sharp as the twang

of a banjo, the general polyglot clamour competing with the music of a Neapolitan band. The atmosphere, painfully at contrast with the outside air, was stale with the smell of hothouse flowers, cigarette smoke and perfumes of newest, most aggressive vogue.

Harding hesitated, confronting the rococo splendours and uproar of this traveller's paradise, which had unsuccessfully aimed at rivalling certain fashionable rendezvous of Paris, and had accepted its vogue among the vulgar. Its catch-all magnificence, that had recently cropped up, mushroom fashion, to remind one of the determined spread of bad taste, was a side of Paris he hated. He resented it, as he resented with the artist's rebellion, the unmeaning display of New York that scoffed at modest means and simple living. It was the oppression of such conditions that, among other things, he had sought to escape in coming to Europe where, supposedly, a gross and flaunting opulence fell before the disdain of centuried culture. His features only recaptured their conventional lines as, after some moments, he caught sight of Miss Vanderhurst's signalling fan.

The spinster welcomed him with a smile which had the reputation of putting the most awkward at ease. One of her definite traits was her enthusiasm for friends, of which she had a countless number, scattered over the world, for she travelled untiringly; and it was instinctive with her to make much of every small merit possessed by people with whom she came in

contact. Harding had known her first in New York, where they had a common *milieu* in a set of non-serious Bohemians, who played at being interested in literature as countenanced by the best American magazines. The intimacy, partly accidental, ripened on the elderly woman's part into a flattering concern for Julian Harding's work and unformulated future. The literary calling had for her a romantic appeal, owing, no doubt, to her ignorance of its prosaic side; and Harding impressed her, without intention, as a promising young man it would eventually be a credit to know. He had published some verses and was supposed to have achieved success among people content with surface signs of prosperity. And Miss Vanderhurst had accordingly made herself his champion, spreading among her world sanguine views of his unfolding talents.

"You see how selfish I am," she said, when he had made his way to her side, "asking you here alone like this. But I wanted a chance for a real talk, to hear all about your stay in Paris. This is rather a nice place, don't you think, for tea . . . such amusing, incredible people. It quite reminds me of the Waldorf-Astoria."

"Yes, entirely too much," he returned in the bantering manner he adopted when with people like Miss Vanderhurst. It pleased his vanity that such contact, for which he had no special aptitude, created in him a kind of verbal effervescence like tisane—one could hardly call it champagne sparkle. "It's what I contend. Americans only come to Europe to find

their civilization translated into foreign languages. The idea of you, Miss Vanderhurst"—it was a liberty his long acquaintance allowed—"caring for such Ollendorf French as this. There's not a Parisian here. . . . It's a crowd made up of our countrymen, *rastaquoères*, people from heaven knows where. It may be all very well for others—like myself—who haven't exhausted their *naïveté*. But for you, who knows Europe so enviably . . . where, I demand, is your excuse for your taste in hotels?" And he regarded her challengingly.

She listened indulgently to his gay tirade, her thin fingers, rich with rose diamonds, busying themselves with the tea service an attendant, with haughty assiduity, placed on the table. She was an effective old maid, with her beautifully arranged grey hair, that had the tone of unpolished silver, and her complexion, which though crumpled, had a touch of pleasant pink that time was unable to banish. Her kindness, indeed, gave her personality almost a physical bloom. Travel, much familiarity with people and things, had supplemented the somewhat rudimentary education of her period. She read the best books, took in the reviews, and could talk resourcefully, expressing enough borrowed opinions to serve her well in whatever world her insatiable love of society carried her. Harding sometimes found her really entertaining through little flashes of unexpectedness in her worldly comments.

"My dear Mr. Harding," she returned dryly, as she

passed him his cup, "when you've arrived at years of indiscretion, like me, you won't bother about *rastaquoères* and the other things you object to round us. Coming abroad, in the sense of half a century ago—as though it were a pilgrimage to a shrine—is obsolete, you know, except with school mistresses, stereopticon lecturers—and dreamers like yourself. I don't take my Europe so seriously. I travel for change and comfort. All Americans adore their ease, and I'm a thorough American, even if I spend half my time away from my own land. Perhaps that is the reason Europe is a school of patriotism. When I select a hotel it's to be amused; and noise and movement please me. It picks up my system like an electric shock, does me good generally. That's why I came here. It's always so delightfully crowded. Then," she added, with a smile that was meant to be humorous, "the waiters don't have to be told to serve ice-water."

She leaned back, and unsheathing her gold lorgnette, applied them to her shrewd eyes.

"Tell me," she demanded, "what half these people do when they're not drinking bad tea and drowning the music by their gabble. . . . Or rather, *what* are they?"

"Don't ask *me* that," he said, yielding to youthful affectation and a love of phrase making. "It always seems easier to say what people aren't than what they are. They belong to the *genus homo*; and beyond that it is a waste of time to speculate. I doubt if half know the secret of their own being. One may infer, however, that the women are mostly possessed by a

passion to pervert their natural looks. Every blonde appears to be an evolved brunette as every brunette an ex-blonde. Are they, after all, more than hair-dressers' blocks? If you'd lift off their heads you'd probably find their breasts stuffed with candied violets like Easter novelties in confectioners' windows. I wonder if anything about them is human—their laughter, even. It sounds like a sort of polite hic-cough—mere mechanical emissions of sound, as though a dentist had been administering gas before extracting a tooth. Heine would say they had metronomes under their corsets, in lieu of hearts."

She smiled, finding him rather amusing. "I don't know about the metronomes," she objected, meeting his mood. "I question whether there's room for anything under those French corsets—even for the women themselves. They do seem unnecessarily artificial, with their bleach and rouge. It goes to prove how times have changed since I was a girl. Nowadays it's almost immodest to appear in public with nothing on one's face but what nature put there. Of course people in society used to paint, but they did it with no intention of deceiving. It was the line they drew between themselves and—well, other people. The demimondaine sets the fashion now. There's nothing so democratic as the toilette. Doucet and Paquin, they are the great levellers; ladies go there to look what they aren't, as others go to pretend to be what they'd like to be, as one so often hears it said. I'm getting old, but I've no desire to bury my bones in a reddened-

and-whited sepulchre like people here." She said it with the little air of one knowing that nature makes all that superfluous.

He was lighting a cigarette—a Nubian, the *clou* of the place, with a dazzling display of primitive teeth, had given his assistance to that ceremony. It was part of Harding's protest regarding the place that this chocolate-visaged person so enchanted his countrymen—"and what," he asked, "have you been doing with yourself since you came here?"

"I?" She smiled again, for she never forgot to be charming. "Nothing, as yet, except standing all day, with the patience of a pillared saint, at Amy Linker's. What woman *can* endure in martyrdom to these Paris fitters! How do we ever survive it, do you know?" And she turned a face of comical appeal on him.

Some experience in social compliment made him ready. "I suppose," he said, "it's the survival of the truly fitted, to apply the Darwinian theory to dress-making—that fortunate class to which you belong." And he indicated by a glance of vague appreciation his hostess's attire. It was one of Miss Vanderhurst's discretions that she wore only what became her years and personality.

"There," she returned, with a flattered laugh, "make fun of us poor females and our efforts to look our best. I suppose you hold us all up to ridicule in your book, don't you? And what, may I ask, has become of the *magnum opus*? You know, I have had a long-standing order for it at the book-seller's."

Harding stifled a sigh at the inevitable query. It was one he had learned to dread. "But," he protested, "I've scarcely begun my book. It takes time to write anything worth while. There is the equation of temperament—worn phrase that it is—to consider. One isn't a machine, you know."

"Yes, I suppose there is that to consider, as you say," she allowed dubiously. "Temperament is something all artists claim—though just what they mean by it rather puzzles me. It's such a vague-sounding thing—a kind of unrest, I suppose one should say, that keeps them from work at the time. . . . Yet, after all, does it differ from other people's moods, the ups and downs from which we suffer, and in spite of which we manage somehow to do what's expected of us? That's what has never been clear to me." And she assumed a comely air of half combativeness, not rare with people who, convinced of the indolence of the artist class, feel missioned to administer a spoonful of reproof as occasion offers.

He shrugged. "You know, the Lord has made us what we are—what can we do as to temperament or anything else?"

She regarded him with that pleasant light air of one to whom nothing has been particularly serious in life.

"If your temperament troubles," she replied, "Why don't you consult my doctor? He's such a nice man, and it's wonderful the way he builds one up."

"Ah," he retorted, half moved to earnestness by

the sacred things she touched on. "I see. You regard 'temperament,' as only a kind of spring fever of the soul. Isn't that so? It's quite typically American of you, to think it. It's because there are millions of other Americans who back you up that artists—to use the grand phrase—either perish among us, through sheer inanition and misunderstood purpose, or come to Europe, where they find the atmosphere of comprehension which helps their work. American contempt for leisure of mind and body is one reason why there is so little art at home. They ask us to make bricks without straw—and consequently we feel it to be a land of bondage and come to Europe as to Canaan. Besides, America is too much concerned with the Beauty of Holiness to remember the holiness of beauty. How can one expect abstract art to be respected there?"

"But you shouldn't feel that way," she protested, with patriotism. "America was where you were born, where you expect to get things. You say it discourages art, yet it's where you mean to print your books and find your public."

He was in the grasp of the gloom that came to him with her protest. "That's true enough," he acknowledged. "But there's no inconsistency in the fact. The desire to live by what means we may is instinctive, Miss Vanderhurst. Everybody tries to elude the millstones. Some sublime individuals hold it our duty to be ground between them . . . but I don't know that I agree. There's a class of people who are not really

qualified for life under present conditions. It's not their fault. They didn't fix their century, choose their type. The world calls them the 'failures.' Whereas, the truth is, perhaps, it's the reason for their existence that has failed."

He spoke with attempted lightness, conscious of the heresy of such views, but Miss Vanderhurst scarce heeded. She was still full of the enormity of his prior declarations.

"But it's absurd of you to say you can't write in America," she debated. "Why, New York is full of authors—I haven't time to keep up with half they bring out. Now I'm going to tell you what I think is the real reason you praise Europe. It's because you can throw off the yoke of convention here. And you shouldn't want to. You mustn't fall into bad habits, like those Latin Quarter creatures who go about with baggy trousers and so much hair. But there's no danger of your doing *that*," she qualified, with a satisfied inspection of his clothes. "You're too much of a gentleman to imitate Murger's characters. No, if you live in Paris, you should meet the right sort of people . . . go into society." She was very firm about it, as he saw.

"*Le monde où l'on s'ennuie*," he mocked. "It's the sort of thing I came abroad to avoid."

"It's the world where one gets on in life," she retorted rather tartly. "And you have a future to consider. Every young man must know people. What can a novelist learn about human nature, unless he goes about? My friends"—her pride in the word

was excuse enough—"will be delighted to receive a promising young author like you."

That everybody should know everybody else, was a mania with Miss Vanderhurst. She possessed to perfection the art of bringing people together and cementing ties that would never have existed except for her unbounded belief in human affinities. With her, as with a large part of the world to which she belonged, kindness took the form of a pleasant practical investment. She had experienced all the benefits of being "passed on," as she put it, and if she gave introductions freely, she as freely made use of them herself. Julian Harding was, in her eyes, an eligible young man who, besides his picturesque profession, had a good deal of personal attractiveness. She had, in her enthusiasm, discovered in him some resemblance to Titian's Man with the Glove, her ideal of gentlemanly looks: and to be gentlemanly looking was all that one of his sex need be, even failing the standard set by the Louvre masterpiece.

Harding accepted her statement with a cynical grimace, that veiled a sense of flattery. "But Paris is full of 'promising young authors,' " he remarked. "It's easy enough to 'promise'—a different thing to keep one's word. Society is tired of accepting the I.O.U. individual—he so often turns out to be worthless paper. People nowadays go in for more solid securities. That's my reason for keeping out of your Vanity Fair—I leave it to some better equipped Autolycus."

"Nonsense," was her brisk retort, "Society is

where a nice looking man like you belongs, talent or no talent. What's the use of wasting yourself on common people. Now, let me think whom I most want you to meet. There are the Eversleys, of course . . . charming Americans living in Paris. You remember, I gave you a letter to them last autumn. They have a little set you'll find quite to your taste, I'm sure. Lena—the mother, I mean—is a dear friend of mine. She married a Colonel Eversley, of England, who died shortly afterwards, and she's lived abroad ever since. She is giving a garden fête, by the way, next week, and I'll ask her if I may bring you. She has a daughter, Monica, but I doubt if you'll care much for her."

"And why won't I?" he demanded, thinking how little she knew what he did care for.

"Well, for one thing, she's too serious for you."

"And how serious does a girl have to be for that?" Harding contended humorously.

"Oh, I know your sex," she affirmed confidently, "especially literary men. They like to do their own thinking. I remember Keats wanted to lay his head on an unanalytic breast, and wasn't it Heine's Rosalie who was so attractive because she couldn't read? Monica is a nice enough girl, but she doesn't care for society, goes in for art—she does beautiful enamels—charities, and that sort of thing. In fact, she's what one may call a superior girl."

"With the usual inferior figure?"

"Oh, her figure is quite above criticism. Indeed, some people consider her very handsome . . . as she

ought to be, with her mother such a beauty. No, she doesn't represent the homely, spectacled kind of culture. Only, as I say, she is full of her Dorcas doings . . . and rather a pity, perhaps." Miss Vanderhurst took society seriously, holding, as Harding facetiously put it to himself, that charity began "At Homes."

"Well, it's quite as fashionable as bridge, these days—charity," he observed.

At which she made a little mouth, characteristic when her friends were assailed.

"Yes, but I do Monica the justice of believing her governed by higher motives," she returned. "You shouldn't be so cynical, Mr. Harding."

He smiled at her crispness. "Then it's the daughter, after all, you want me to admire?"

"Admire her, certainly, if you wish. . . . Only it will, I fancy, be a waste of time. I understand there's a Frenchman devoted to her—a Monsieur Fernet, who took the Prix de Rome for sculpture. Seriously," she continued, "I should much like you to be nice to Lena. I've known and loved her since I was a girl. To be sure, I was considerably her senior then, as I am like her grandmother now." And she gave a tolerant laugh, that had a great deal of sound philosophy in it. "Lena is one of those Madame Récamiers that one meets, perhaps, once in a lifetime. She's quite as young in heart as she is in looks. Her youthfulness is one of her little weaknesses, I admit; and she spends more time at the Institut de Beauté—like other beauties—than I'd care to myself . . . but *chacun à son goût*. Besides,

she has her standard to keep up, poor dear. One can forgive the harmless vanity in a woman as pretty as she is. She may strike you as a little frivolous at first, but her girlhood was a rather sad one, and that excuses her love of enjoyment now. She entertains a great deal, especially the art set. You'll meet Percy Colston at her house, among others."

"And who is Percy Colston?"

"But I thought everybody in Paris knew him. It's his play that's to be given next Monday. He's an American that has expatriated himself—sold his birth-right for a mess of foreign ideas. I don't know that I care for him: he is affected, precious, and far too much of an Antinous in looks. He's been useful to Lena in helping her to make her little circle of clever people, so I don't wonder she's devoted to him."

Miss Vanderhurst allowed it in a way that suggested qualifications. It was evident she had Lena a good deal on her mind. She hesitated, considering Harding as though interweaving him into some design. But she checked herself before words came. Curiosity, of a sort, made him ply her further with questions as to these friends of hers, who struck him as a bit depressing in contemplation: a woman of smiling anachronistic youth, preoccupied with beauty lotions and bleaches; a daughter on whom doubtless weighed the burden of heavy, half-digested reading. He was not fond of what passed in the world as "culture"; it seemed to him it deadened the natural aroma in people. The girl would take herself seriously and expect him to take

her at her own value. Knowing that Miss Vanderhurst was inclined to throw a primrose hue over those she had once accepted, he asked, with pretended enthusiasm:

"So Mrs. Eversley is interested in art as well as her daughter?"

"Well, not as interested in it as in artists, perhaps," she replied. "They amuse her, and she stays them with flacons and comforts them with truffles. They make her Wednesday dinners decorative. Now Percy Colston is altogether decorative. He goes well with Lena's furniture, which is mostly of his choosing. That's one reason, I suppose, she so likes to have him about—he's a kind of *objet d'art* . . ."

A puzzled look had crossed her face.

"Have you noticed," she interrupted herself, "those Americans over there? I seem to recall having seen them before—and, you know, I'm rather proud of never forgetting faces."

Harding followed her glance. "It's Miss Zenobia Baxter and her niece, of Boston," he said.

In her interest she did not remark his constraint. "Of course," she said, relievedly, "I remember now. They were at Pinehurst, a year ago last March. Miss Buttercup was doing a great deal of golfing with a cloud of male witnesses. It was said at the *Carolina* that the aunt went to bed with her sunbursts on—a rather terrible person. It's the family, you know, of Hiram Baxter, the tea merchant, who is so absurdly rich. 'Baxter's Surpassing Ceylon' . . . one sees it advertised

everywhere." Miss Vanderhurst resorted to her lorgnette, to assist her astigmatic vision in summing them up. "The girl is handsome, but too conspicuously dressed. And like that sort of American, she talks with the loud pedal on. *How* we do love to make our presence felt! When we come into public places I can't help thinking of the Soldiers' Chorus in *Faust*."

"If we were only that musical," he commented. "But I fear we were born with megaphones, not bugles, in our mouth."

He was in that stage of European development when Americans are rather harsh as to their own people.

Miss Vanderhurst still inspected the objects of her criticism.

"You can see," she said, "that that Italian tenor is singing his 'O sole mio' to her, and that she knows it. I do wonder if all that colour is her own."

"If it isn't," he said lightly, "it isn't because she hasn't enough of her own. But I've observed that putting on paint is as much a question of temperament as of cheeks. There are women I know with complexions like roses, that rouge. It's the age of gilding refined gold."

"Well, there's nothing refined about Hiram Baxter's gold," she answered, with her Knickerbocker prejudices coming to the surface. "They are friends of yours, then?" and she eyed him with suspicion.

"Yes," he admitted, "I've seen something of them. . . . They've been spending the winter in Paris."

She let the fact settle down in her before she replied.

"So, like Jason, you're in quest of the golden fleece? It was stupid of me not to guess the reason why you neglected the letters I gave you. Yet," and she smiled with the charity which comprehended conditions alien to herself, "why not marry to be comfortable? Literary men, of all people, need to be looked after, and probably Miss Buttercup will make an excellent wife. Americans are so clever at getting civilised . . . that's one reason I respect them so. Now, it won't be hard to teach your young woman not to put too much enthusiasm into showing how perfectly at ease she is. One often goes to such pains to be vulgar to prove one isn't. But I blame the girl's aunt and not her for her little mistakes."

"I've heard it said," he observed, "that Miss Zenobia looks every inch a duchess. You notice she has a good many round the waist!" And he broke into a laugh that was genuine enough.

"Yes, I suppose she does look . . . like some duchesses, poor thing;" she replied. "But that's not her fault. No doubt, she has her good points. I'm sure, any way, she's kind-hearted—people with double chins always are. Besides, you're not going to marry the aunt."

"Have I said I was going to marry anybody!" with an apposing laugh.

"No, of course you haven't," she promptly returned. "One doesn't live fifty odd years without discovering it's generally what people *don't* say that counts. You're doubtless right, Mr. Harding, in marrying where there's room for improvement. Half the failures in matrimony

come from mating perfection. It will give you something to do, sand-papering Miss Buttercup down so that she can pour her father's tea for you with credit, when you're a celebrity. And where there's so much tea, she went on with good-natured banter, "it's a pity not to drink it with nice people. Now, I'll let you go to your heiress, who, I see, is pining for you." She gave him her hand as she spoke, adding with more gravity, "and remember, try to be happy. It's an art you haven't sufficiently cultivated, I fear."

Her sharp old eyes had marked the shadow on his face, in spite of its conventional smiles.

"I wish I could," he answered, with some seriousness.

She had retained his hand. "My dear boy," she said gently, "there's something about you that worries me a little, though I don't know what it is. It's commonplace to remind you that all life's before you—and to have everything still to live for *is* such a wonderful thing. If youth only knew," and she vented a little sigh, "but it doesn't, so why preach? But be warned, the time will come when you'll regret *les jours heureux quand j'étais misérable*. If I've learned nothing else of life, I've taught myself to take its present joys. And now, goodbye. . . . And remember, I shall expect you at four o'clock, next Monday, to go with me to the Eversleys'."

CHAPTER II

HARDING had been moved to say something to Miss Vanderhurst which he usually kept to himself, aware of the ridicule with which it was received. He was, as he knew, governed by a most unpopular philosophy about life, the theory of which had escaped him in his rather artificial talk with that amiable and experienced spinster. It was that there is a certain proportion of people in the world wholly unqualified for life under its present conditions. The thought often mocked him in his literary impulse, inclined him, as a general thing, to feel that the profession he had adopted, like any other he might have chosen, was merely the invention of a man who, from necessity, indulges in deception, by parading a "reason" for his existence before the world. He felt there was no reason at all—that it was all a pitiable pretence. It lay far back in life, was even the strange germ of his infancy. Little able to define himself, he a good deal puzzled others: for the world mostly depends, in attempting to understand us, on the explanatory attitude we adopt towards it. Harding made no attempt to offer even half-clues. Of varied opinions entertained about life, he was conscious that his was the least acceptable. To dispose of deity was more excusable than to dispose of oneself as a negligible factor in the grand scheme of things which, according

to popular hypothesis, whirled about the hub of one's poor little universe. It offended the egotism of mankind, and that was the sin of sins. Mankind was created in the likeness of God. . . . Was it not that, half the time, it confused itself with that supreme spirit?

Besides, in Harding's case, there seemed no particular warrant for the depressing heresy. He was young, with, as Miss Vanderhurst unoriginally remarked, "the world before him"; together with his presentable appearance, also an asset in her eyes, he was possessed of considerable, if somewhat confused talent, and unhampered by definite ills of the flesh. That was as much capital as the average person had to draw on, when taking part in the game of life, the rigours of which, as was often affirmed by his friends, impressed its zest. It was certainly the natural, robust way of looking at things, they said, and Harding not infrequently was obliged to agree that it was.

Yet—and there had lain his melancholy—the cankering sense of personal futility was in him; and it too often triumphed over his arguments with himself. It seemed to him that he was born with that blind, gnawing worm in his heart, that it had always, more or less consciously, made its presence known to him . . . even in earliest youth, when the poet part of his nature awakened to the mystery and beauty of the world, bringing a curious old kind of world-ache. Child that he was, he recognized a certain exiling difference between himself and others. As he waxed older, he endeavoured to diagnose the feeling, which

seemed to say he was not in his own spiritual country or age. Life struck him oddly as having some elusive quality of alien unmeaningness, as if he had been born without birthright. So affected was his imagination by the idea, that he believed he saw the confirmation in all he futilely tried to do; and he ended by saying to himself he would always grope and never reach an actual goal. It was a desolating philosophy, but it had the merit of being sincere.

Up to his present thirty years, life had been one of rather lamentable makeshift. His boyhood had passed pleasantly enough, amid ease and parental indulgence. And his taste for books had naturally led to his being sent to a university, even at some pinch of family pocket. Already things had begun to go wrong with the Hardings. His father, a man without business or profession, but possessed by a passion for visionary fortune-making, had, by a last unlucky investment, consumed all but a pittance of money, hardly sufficient to keep himself and his heroically Christian wife in their Catskill home, whence one could see the Hudson bending in wide silvery expanses as it poured its waters on to New York, seemingly so remote from the peace of green things that the Hardings enjoyed.

When the knowledge came that his father was no longer able to support the expense of his education, Julian abandoned university life without the regret that might have come from riper study. He recognized that he had not the scholarly mind. His acquisition of knowledge had been spasmodic and superficial; his

memory was inaccurate; he could master only what emotionally appealed to him. He had but skimmed the classics, retained general outlines of history, drawn sparse food from philosophy, and he added to this small mental capital a fair acquaintance with general literature.

It was a slender equipment, and he could, with it, hardly enter a profession. He turned, therefore, without complaint, to bread earning in a business world. He was conscious here of a lack of qualification. But he possessed the hopefulness of youth, in his brighter moments. That will wins the day, was so well authenticated an axiom that he accepted it as truth, applying it to his attitude towards work.

An ineradicable fear of life was forgotten in these initial efforts of living. Search for occupation proved, however, vain; letters of seeming influence, personal appeal, all was met by polite subterfuge, easing conscience on one side, tending to sustain false hope on the other. Harding had the precocity to see that his inutility was read at a glance; that he inspired the practical world with suspicion. Yet he did not quail before the recognition. . . . He often wondered, later, what became of the spirit that could so resolutely, yet so hopelessly face life, in those early days.

Was there nothing to do, then, he asked himself, but try to turn his vague literary talents to some account? Favour of a kind had been shown his verses by different magazines. There had been, perhaps, a real flash of inspiration in them; but successful

versifiers were a rarity; and, in truth, it demanded greater power than he possessed to stir the dreary twilight fallen on the realm of poetry, though the wasted Muses still wove their thin laurels for a few brows. As for prose writing, he had done little of it, and, as was pointed out to him with academic severity by his instructors, his style showed the over-coloured lyricism common to the poetic mind, depreciating its journalistic usefulness. Besides, he was still too much the dreamer. Experience of life, of human nature, resource of the story-teller—was not within his compass. People in general, the concerns of daily living, had never much interested him; his mind lay still under the spell of the unreal, that phantasy the century derided in its passion for the vivid notes of the contemporaneous.

His funds sank sadly low; yet pride forbade a return home, beaten from the fields of labour. Desperate, he consulted, one day the "Want" columns of a newspaper, and chanced on the advertisement of an obscure publishing house in need of someone "who could make himself useful." The address was a shabby old-time mansion, in a part of the town long abandoned by the fashion which had once hallowed it. At the sight of the well-dressed applicant, the dyspeptic-faced proprietor of the dubious concern declared Harding unfit for the manual work desired; but as Harding persisted in his appeal, he was at last engaged on the wages of three dollars a week.

He nevertheless rejoiced over this first foothold

in commercial life, and threw himself energetically in his tasks. These began at six in the morning, when he set out on the basement rail sensational announcements of the pirated second-rate publications of the house; after which he swept the floors and made fires preparatory to the arrival of his employer and the several clerks. A certain socialistic treatise, which had attained wide popularity in England, was the main source of the publisher's prosperity; and this cheap American edition, flaunting cherry-coloured covers, Harding spent the day tying up in express parcels; or he prepared for the mail bag a weekly sheet, composed of cuttings from newspapers and periodicals, which, under an iconoclastic title, was launched on a small world of rabid reformers. The occasional visits of these subscribers—some of whom had dreams of founding Utopias in uncivilized lands—added to the ironic enjoyment he took in his work. Cheerfulness did not desert him, in spite of the hard makeshifts of his life. The incongruity of his position pleased his sense of humour and added to his knowledge of human types. By writing verses at night he earned a little extra money, enough to keep him alive; and after some weeks he secured a more lucrative place in another more reputable publishing-house which, hearing what he was doing, reconsidered the letter of recommendation he had presented on first coming to the city.

He found, however, that the change, if more advantageous to his pocket, was more offensive to his

feelings than the humble occupation given up. Besides, the novelty of unsuitable toil had begun to wear off leaving him with a keener sense of deprivations. He had now before him the necessity, as a clerk in a popular book-shop, of trying to adopt the dapper airs and glib speciousness that obtained round him. To rattle off formulas of unread books with the manner of the well-informed, to hesitate at no lie calculated to force on customers a dull work of the house in preference to a more desirable one produced by a rival firm, these were some of the expected qualifications of successful book clerkship. Harding revolted at such standards of servile mendacity; traditions of birth, instinctive scrupulousness of nature, not yet yielding to time, made him balk at being thus broken on the wheel of trade usage; and the rebellion was quickly noted. The clerks resented his reserve, that cooled their advances; the head of the department, a lean, jauntily-dressed time-server, delighted in humiliating one who presumed to play the gentleman behind the counter. And after the "rush season"—Christmas "holiday week," that exacted of him and his tired fellow-clerks night work at poor extra wages—he was told he was no longer needed on the ground that the pay-roll of the house demanded curtailment. He left the shop with a feeling of inexpressible relief, though it thrust him again face to face with the desperate problem of living.

From one mean job to another he drifted through the winter. The humiliation of these continued defeats

affected his spirits; and he suffered, too, from a personal shabbiness, that proclaimed his failure to the world. His nervous organization, never strong, demanded better nourishment than was afforded by the cheap boarding houses, noisy with vulgar inmates, where he found shelter in unsanitary well-rooms. The strain of night-work—for in the only hours he was free he feverishly wrote whatever editors would take, sowed seeds of insomnia which eventually began sapping his vitality. Yet, as he told himself, there was nothing to do but struggle on; that inescapable fact discounted any sentiment of heroism that might have come to his spiritual support. In truth, the idea of heroism of effort never crossed his mind, for there were too many people like him in the world. With odd enough persistence, as he came to think in the end, he clung to the hypothesis that life, if it failed to be a bountiful mother, must at least give grudging stepdame dole to the deserving; and he pleased himself, on occasion, with picturing ultimate reward of honest effort at self-maintenance. Surely there was a key to his prison door that he would find at last!

Work had permitted no return home; and to inquiring letters from his parents, he returned evasive replies. . . . Why add to the melancholy of their aged days by recounting his disappointments? But as the spring came on, the longing for his familiar mountains, for the sweetness and healing of green growing things, came to him like thirsty mirages looming on desert sands. He endeavoured to satisfy this nature hunger

by strolls in Central Park or along Riverside Drive in the glamorous twilights of the unfolding year. His passion for beauty found some solace on Sunday afternoon visits to the Metropolitan Museum with its pictures and marbles, that recreated old regions of imagination where once he had strayed.

It was here, before the nobler things of art, that fits of ineffable sadness swept him; here, where with reviving ache for the loveliness of life, he experienced a sense of bitter alienation from the world that held his youth captive. He had not been born, he told himself, for such mean struggle; and even victory, if ever it came, could not compensate for what fortune had robbed him . . . that evanescence of some fragile inner quality of boyhood, right to a realm of spirit where once he had wandered and felt himself at home.

One hot day in August, as he tramped the street in the dreary capacity of a book agent, he received a sunstroke and was taken, unconscious, to a hospital, where he lay ill for some weeks. On his convalescence, the doctor advised a sea-trip, and with money supplied by his parents, aware at last of his straits, he embarked on a sailing vessel for South America, where a friend of university days was engaged in cattle-raising. And here, in a new world of bracing out-door life, he spent a half-year piecing together his shattered health.

On returning to New York it seemed that the door of opportunity at which he had knocked so unsuccessfully, was no longer bolted, but stood invitingly ajar. He had written ranch life in a series of articles that a

magazine readily accepted. These led, after a little, through friendly intervention, to an offer of a literary sub-editorship on a newspaper that had decided to expand its book-reviewing department to something like the dignity of space given its sporting columns. His articles read well, and he should have been loth to acknowledge what their effectiveness cost him. His natural prose style had no spontaneity of life, and the "pleasing quality" of his sketches had been secured only by determined re-writing.

While the success of these articles inspired him with some belief in his ability to write acceptable prose, he found his pen far from trained for the work imposed on him as a reviewer. He knew little of the ephemeral literature of the day. What he had read had been of the best, though unsystematic in choice and mostly governed by whim; yet for all that, he had acquired a fair accumulation of useful odds and ends to aid him in his task. Besides which he had a natural fitness of taste, with a disposition to judge art broadly and impersonally. With scrupulous care, he attacked the toppling crags of books hemming in his desk. He deliberated over his judgments as though they were life and death sentences, and devoted to the fashion of saying things such pains that he found little time for recreation. His seriousness amused his fellow journalists, but as they saw his ardour continue they spoke of him in the end with some respect.

The routine of a New York newspaper office was something to which he slowly grew inured. Although

in the world of news-gathering, he never was—nor could be—of it. Willingly he performed what was demanded of him—and it was varied enough—but at bottom there remained an unconquerable detachment of spirit. He cared nothing about the multitudinous details of life that gave reason for journalism. What did mere news matter to anybody? Yet it was his obligation to take the trivial seriously, bend his knee before Ephemera, supreme Tenth muse of feverish modern worship. The turmoil of the office was a reproduction in life of the vast pandemonium reigning outside, in the street, in the looming, honeycombed monoliths that made New York mountainous, stupendously scenic, a transplanted Garden of the Gods. It was all part of the madness of the new Stone Age, where everything was hard, granitic, from the giddy Babel towers round him to the hearts of those that reared them. The breathlessness of journalism hectored and confused him. There were days of “rush copy,” where no time was granted to think of what one wrote, the altars of the Press called for their hecatombs; and what was not known, had to be invented. It was not ignorance that was a crime, it was its confession. The school was one in which, if he failed to secure a diploma, he could hardly help acquiring the art of doing what was expected; and he did it, in spite of distaste, with more than average proficiency.

It was among such surroundings that the best years of youth passed. His salary increased slowly, until he was able to live with a fair amount of comfort.

Faces came and went in the office; but he remained. Change meant acquiring new methods for new masters, who would exact the same thing . . . the greatest amount of work for the least amount of money. That was business, that was life, it was what New York scrawled across the heavens that arched above it in sulphurous smoke . . . the only coherent message shrieked by the roar of occupation. The thought did not make him socialistic, as it made some. It produced rather a dull wonder that he had ever conceived life to be other than he found it. Yet, why had things been born in him only to fade like sad sunsets heralding starless dark . . . the darkness of instincts atrophied, of tastes starved to death? He was treading, it was true, the common path, known as the "morality of labour" It was what a generally accepted philosophy termed "evolution," bringing, it was affirmed, the fruit of the tested and perfected man. It might mean perfection for some. . . . But was there ultimate perfection in it for him? One by one, it seemed, the strings of his spirit snapped, the innate music of life faltered and grew thin. How was it "evolving" to change from the dreamer to the accomplished slave of circumstance, having nothing beyond the day filled with its trivial sops and its utter lassitude of heart?

As he learned to do his work more facilely, he found some leisure for human intercourse. Reading as a pastime had long been discounted through the monotony and eye-strain of reviewing; and there remained no freshness for personal creation after a day de-

voted to the creations of others. Relaxation of mind was a necessity, and he began to go out in the world. His parents—who meanwhile had died in weary agedness—had once had many social ties in New York, and he was received by these friends for his family's sake and for his own. One day he gathered together his printed verses and sent them to a publisher. The appearance of the small volume received some favourable comment; then it passed into the shadow of the things of yesterday. Its little hour on the book-stalls had, however, given him his claim to notice; and New York classed him among its hosts of lesser authors.

He dipped into the artistic circles of the city, yet with no great feeling of congeniality. What he met seemed to him a depressing proof of the decadence of modern letters. It was better, he avowed, to see authorship through the glass of book-shop windows than thus face to face shorn of last illusions. Those who succeeded and those who failed seemed equally corrupted by the commercialism of the day. The talk he listened to, reminded him of the ticking in a broker's office; books appeared to have a doubtful value beyond the market quotations. Literature had become a means of bread winning, and everything about it smacked of the dough-trough. It was with disappointment he turned from it all to a world which had, at least, the charm of easy, agreeable living, where cultivation was like a personal ornament, not a ball-and-chain dragged about to recall one's servitude to art. Yet he was not

very congenial here. His attitude towards society was one of surface adaptations, that left the inner man unused. Unwillingly, he acknowledged that he had no talent for getting the best out of people. In spirit he was a stranger within the social gates, one contributing little real and receiving little real in return.

The day arrived when he woke from his stupor of living. He fell in love. It was one of those spontaneous, unreasoning passions of youth that take the heart like a malady. It changed him, brought him down from abstract emotions to a single concrete absorption. But love was all on his side, and when it ended for him, he was still too young not to take it tragically and try to cauterize his heart with cynicism. He believed himself sentimentally bankrupt. He did not tell himself he could never love again. But he was convinced his nature was incapable of any more such reckless, complete giving.

Something, indeed, was for the time being gone; life seemed more and more a hopeless grind, and over his spirit fell more blackly the shadow of realizing the doom he had chosen for himself; a newspaper hack who must pass the rest of his days on a fixed small salary of a newspaper hack.

He revolted, perhaps, because New York had become intolerable to him through the restlessness bred by a heart which still felt its loss; and one day, taking his courage in hand, he applied for a year's leave of absence, in which to go abroad. The paper, perhaps not unappreciative of long faithful service, arranged that he

should do correspondence work for it from Paris. He had picked on Paris as the place most calculated to dissipate melancholy and give back artistic ardour. Perhaps it might even help him to read the sphinx's riddle of life, which, so far, he had unsuccessfully answered.

And now, after a half-year in Paris, he still faced that monster barring existence's Theban road, as unable as before to solve the conundrum demanded of his manhood.

But he had learned one thing—that it was easier to change environment than character.

CHAPTER III

THE fine spring weather on which depended the Eversleys' garden party, that was rather forcing the season, held out, and on the following Monday, Harding presented himself, in accordance with his promise, at Miss Vanderhurst's hotel.

The Eversleys lived at Neuilly, and the cab having passed the Porte Maillot, proceeded up the Boulevard Bineau and turning into a side street drew up before a large, white-plastered corner house with green shutters.

They were admitted into a broad hall, lighted by glass doors giving on a garden. The effect of well-considered decoration, Harding gathered in a hasty glance. Between plastered spaces of wall, left to its original stucco, panels in tempera by Panini displayed charmingly impossible classic landscapes. Below these were several handsome light-framed *canapés* relieved in gold, and flanking the salon doorway verd antique pedestals supported marble busts of eighteenth century actresses by Coysevoix.

Under a great ormolu chandelier, a number of people in theatrical attire were gathered about a graceful youth, dressed as a troubadour, whose voice was raised in shrill grievance above the general talk. From the group, at the sight of the visitors, an elder woman detached herself and, as she came forward, Harding was struck by her unusual prettiness.

"You see, Lena," Miss Vanderhurst remarked, as they exchanged kisses, "we've come ahead of time, as you said we might. I wanted Mr. Harding to meet you before your other guests arrive."

"I'm so glad you did," Mrs. Eversley smiled, "and that Mr. Harding could come. We hope to see a great deal of him while he's in Paris."

Her soft, affected voice was gracious, but he noticed, as she gave him her hand, laden with rings, that she scrutinized his face in an odd way that made him wonder what she expected to read there. It seemed to him the quick glance was half apprehensive. Evidently what she noted relieved her mind, for she smiled again, more sincerely; then led them towards the salon, saying to Miss Vanderhurst:

"Such a time, my dear, as we've been having over Mr. Colston's play. The house, as you see, has been turned into a green room. It's all the fault of the wretched costumier. Mr. Colston gave him implicit directions about the fifteenth century dress—even sketched the designs—and when the things came—at the last moment, of course—he found that his was wrong in a number of little particulars. He takes the principal part, and he's furious. He says the man's stupidity has ruined the play. We are all, I assure you, quite worn out about it . . . I know I look so."

And she glanced, with a pretty air of martyrdom, in a pier glass before which she had, perhaps not by chance, seated herself.

"As though you ever looked anything but charming," Miss Vanderhurst returned, as one administers a

bonbon to a petted child. "It's the wonderful thing about you."

It was, indeed, wonderful, Harding mentally agreed, trying to realize that his hostess was—or rather, "had been"—a contemporary of the grey-haired spinster who faced her. In the discreet light of the white and gold salon, Mrs. Eversley appeared a woman of thirty-five. Yet, if she and Miss Vanderhurst had been "girls together," twenty years more must be nearer the truth. How she had managed so to arrest time's wing, was beyond his masculine surmise, and he had a sudden respect for the immortality conferred by beauty shops. Her early sorrow had apparently left no mark on her bright-haired loveliness, which had the blooming fragility of a Sèvres shepherdess. Her air was one of beguiling sweetness, but he was not quite sure that she was as sweet or as simple as she seemed. There was something about it that seemed as unreal as her bisque-like blooms. He had met the "no harm in her" type before once or twice in his life, and was sensible of the havoc the harmlessness often wrought. He decided to be on his guard until he knew the workings of this fair instance of worldly frivolousness.

She was smiling—with a smile he could fancy one might get a little tired of—in acknowledgement of the spinster's remark, devoured after the fashion of one accustomed to compliments, yet insatiable.

"That's nice of you, dear," she returned, "but you know you're not so critical as the rest of the world." It seemed the place for the little sigh she heaved. "But there, I'm boring you with my troubles. It's too

absurd, isn't it, to make such a tragedy of . . . of a comedy."

She seemed rather pleased at her *mot*, though it ended in a nervous laugh. It was plain, from the sounds outside, that the troubadour, whom Harding guessed to be Percy Colston, had quite lost his temper. His voice arose to the shrill key of a tearful, spoiled child.

Mrs. Eversley made an attempt to ignore the distraction. She talked on with pretty affectedness, but it was obviously forced. Harding marked her straying attention and wondered if his hostess's interest in the angry youth were the cause of the uneasiness. He conceived her to be not above a tangle of small love affairs, although he held her incapable of serious sentiment. A real heart-throb would have the effect, he told himself, of shattering this fragile creature of Sèvres into a myriad bright bits. No doubt she knew that herself. She must have been very wonderful in her real youth, he mused, to be so wonderful in the youth she had invented for herself. There was not a line on her face, and her figure, perfect though it was, did not owe everything to the corset-maker. Harding had heard that hands reveal age where nothing else does; but Mrs. Eversley appeared proud of hers—she raised one to arrange a strand of her not altogether convincing blonde hair. The sapphire on it was hardly brighter than her blue eyes, which seemed to ask masculine protection.

The dispute continued. At last she said, as though with sudden resolution:

"Really, I shall have to go and see if I can't pour oil

on the troubled waters. Poor Mr. Colston's nerves are so upset! It's his artistic temperament, you see. What they need, the lot of them, is their tea. . . . They're quite forgetting people will soon be here. Come, Mr. Harding, let us see what's to be done with these impossible young squabblers."

Harding followed her with some misgiving. It did not appear a propitious moment for the introductions by means of which he saw his hostess planned to quell the difficulties.

The poet seemed the butt of general badinage, which he was taking in bad part. His face was flushed with vexation, in which wounded vanity was dominant. He held a lute, and his violet costume showed off his graceful figure, as he was manifestly aware. Harding conceived a dislike for him, though he admitted the good looks Miss Vanderhurst had described in an epicene way. Effeminacy was certainly to the fore at the moment, for he bit at his lip to restrain tears.

As they approached, Harding heard a blond Englishman, in a herald's surcoat of apple-green, exclaim protestingly:

"I say, Percy, do be a man!"

"I'm *not* a man . . . I'm a poet!" was the peevish rejoinder, and at this the group broke out in amused laughter.

It seemed to have a relieving effect on the group; and someone ventured, "Well, so was Shakespeare, and he didn't make a row over costumes . . . anything did to put on, you know, when he acted."

"Anything *didn't* do," was the dramatist's vehement retort, "as Shakespeare scholars could tell you. The original folios are full of directions about wardrobes..." the rest was lost in the animation that ensued.

Mrs. Eversley paused in her olive-branch-bearing, as though courage failed her.

"I don't wonder he's tired," she said under cover of the babel, "he's worked so hard to make his piece a success. Miss Fitzgerald," she went on, as a last resource, to an Irish girl, with a nimbus of red hair that an Alma Tadema model would have rejoiced in, "will you take Mr. Harding out in the garden and tell Monica to give you all tea? It's much more to the point than discussing Shakespeare at such a time."

Miss Fitzgerald made an expressive face. "Monica is the only one who seems to be taking things calmly. I wish the others emulated her."

She led the way into the garden. It was a limited bit of *plaisance*, sheltered from the street by high, ivy-mantled walls. The spring sunshine had drawn from the shaven sod an intense green, in contrast with the red-gravelled paths, which formed a formal design round the central fountain—a sunken basin with a languid flower of spray, under which a pair of bronze ducks floated complacently. There were some tubbed orange trees, and a moss-streaked Flora, in a bower, that disconsolately held out an offering of fruit. Harding wondered where the play would be given—there was no evidence of a theatre.

Miss Fitzgerald, who was in ordinary dress, led him

towards a marble bench on which Miss Eversley sat, a tea table before her. She seemed to him quite a stately person in her theatrical garb. The dress was of samite, ermine-edged and embroidered with silver fleurs-de-lys, and about her head was a fillet of oak leaves tied by long white ribbons. Conversing with her was a man of heavy build and artist-like bushy hair, presented as Monsieur Fernet.

After a moment or so of talk, the Frenchman and Miss Fitzgerald moved off, to join several actors who issued from the house, leaving Miss Eversley and Harding alone.

As he took the glass of punch she served him, Harding admitted that Monica Eversley hardly realized his mental sketch of her. She was handsomer than he expected, her features were strong and regular without being tiresomely correct. Her eyes rather took his fancy in their grey-green of a moral Felise and set with short jet lashes. Her complexion was singular in its dull nacre tone, that did not seem ill-health. She was serious, certainly, compared with her mother, and he didn't wonder at it. . . . There appeared some provocation at reaction from the latter's artificiality. Frivolous mothers frequently produced sober daughters.

She shook hands with him in a cool, detached way.

"You've been all winter in Paris, I think Miss Vanderhurst said," she remarked. He fancied she had no great interest in the play; she had listened with what was almost impatience to a comment he had made about her costume.

"Yes," he said. "I came after the bad weather set in—hardly a time for favourable impressions. I had the romantic idea Paris was pre-empt from ordinary vicissitudes of climate. What a different place it is in spring. . . like a gay finish to a Scotch sermon. Yet it's always artistic, isn't it. . . . There were winter days that were worth seeing from my balcony on the Seine. I suppose Whistler is responsible for them. You know he discovered the Thames fogs."

If he expected appreciation of his effort at brightness, he was disappointed.

"You live on the quays, then?" she asked, evidently only to make conversation.

"Yes, literally on them, most of the time. That's where I do my idling. I picked quarters for the sake of the river; I like it more than anything else about Paris. It was after I tried pensions. . . . I thought that was the way to learn the language. I didn't, of course. Does one ever hear French in Paris? It seems a dead tongue. So," he went on autobiographically, in spite of her formal air, "being bored to no purpose by superannuated Anglo-Saxon spinsters, I decided on my present lodgings rather the Grub Street sort, but with something big to look at out of the window—Notre Dame. *Mal de briques* is an intermittent fever of mine. I was born in the mountains—that's why I get Switzer longings for them. Notre Dame's a kind of Mont Blanc. . . . I work off the feeling by climbing it. Miss Vanderhurst," he added, with a laugh, "thinks it a hopelessly bohemian part of the city. She wants me to give it up for a more respectable address."

"You speak as though you meant to be persuaded," she returned, with a slight arch of her fine brows.

"Shouldn't one spare the feelings of friends?" he challenged gaily.

"At the expense of one's own? I thought men claimed the privilege of ordering their own lives."

"But does one ever order them? I know I've never succeeded in ordering mine," he replied with a shrug.

"I don't believe you've tried . . . that is, hard enough," was her frank answer. He had the feeling, as he met her analyzing eyes, that already she had sized him up as lacking strength of purpose.

Then, as if she preferred more impersonal conversation, she remarked: "If you like Nature, you have the Bois—Parisians are very fond of it."

"But do you think that is Nature, really? I don't care for parks. They lack genuineness as a Watteau marquise with a beribboned crook differs from a shepherdess in homespun. Of course, the public gardens of Paris have charm—but it's the charm of a pretty woman done to death by her coiffeur and manicurist."

"Perhaps that's how our little garden strikes you—it rather suggests a problem in Euclid."

"It's the setting for the present scene, though, isn't it?"

And he regarded the costumed figures straying about, or seated with their tea cups, which Miss Eversley, assisted by two English servants, had been dispensing while she talked. A troubadour, cigarette in mouth,

was tuning his lute, while a lady-in-waiting, smelling a bouquet of almond blossoms, chatted mirthfully with a scarlet-robed Cardinal. Two heralds in bright surcoats amused themselves tossing bits of biscuit to the ducks come to the fountain brink.

"If you care so much for the real in life, it's strange, isn't it, you come to Paris?" Miss Eversley presently observed.

He thought she regarded him with a little more interest.

"Why does one do anything? It's, perhaps, because one's always seeking what one never finds," he answered.

"And, after all, Paris has its own kind of sincerities, I suppose. Artists, you know, are told they find their salvation here." He spoke with a negligent laugh.

"I didn't know that mere places offered that," she returned.

"You mean one ought to find it in oneself? It's an ideal way of looking at things, I admit. Nevertheless, I think we need any aid we can wring out of the sorry scheme of things. Life at best isn't a particularly easy matter. The Great Gardener has lost the habit of planting primroses along one's path. The twentieth century primrose is a hothouse flower . . . only procurable at hothouse prices."

"Why depend on them, then?" He saw that his lightness affected her unfavourably, that she ranked him with the triflers of whom, he fancied, she had seen much. Her coolness rather nettled him, and he went on provokingly:

"Still, if you know how they're grown, I wish you'd give me the horticultural recipe—I'm devoted to prim-roses."

"Are you?" with decided sarcasm, this time. "I'm sorry I don't know much about them." She left the table, adding, "I see that it's time to make a retreat—people are coming."

And, with a dismissing nod, she moved towards the knot of actors who had signalled her.

He watched her go, trailing her long white robes across the green, a scroll clasped against her breast, her head, crowned by its ribboned wreath, held rather proudly, in a way that was probably natural to her. The stately costume of a dead day seemed to isolate her from the modern world with its materialism, its vexing problems, its moral compromises. His gaze followed her until she disappeared, with the other players, through an ivy-framed gate, leading to another garden where the spectacle was to be given; and he thought, with irony, that Wordsworth would have chosen her as an impersonation of his "stern daughter of the voice of God." Her critical composure left him with vague feelings of irritation, and he mused on her lack of wit, her sober way of taking the irresponsible utterances of casual talk. It was rather absurd of her. She seemed to enjoy exercising *le plaisir aristocratique de déplaire*. After all, he concluded, it was only her good looks that saved her.

He watched, for a moment or so, the guests that now

poured from the house. He was about to seek Miss Vanderhurst when he saw Miss Fitzgerald approach, and her bright recognition carried him to her side. Together they passed into the next garden, where, on an ampler lawn an open-air stage was erected, with cushioned benches for the spectators.

"And why aren't you acting, too?" he asked, as they found seats.

"But I am," she returned. "That is, I'm supposed to be filling the rôle of half hostess—a sort of understudy to Mrs. Eversley, as the play is being given in our garden. That's the limit to my histrionic talents. Besides, Mr. Colston wanted me to sing in one of the scenes and Mme. Marchesi forbids my using my voice in public yet. You're an American, aren't you?" she continued. "One doesn't often meet them at the Eversleys'. The only one in favour is Mr. Colston—and he's so *dépaysé* he scarcely counts."

"But why are they excluded from grace?" he asked, rather liking her.

"I don't know that they are exactly excluded. It may only be chance one doesn't oftener see them at the house—though I shouldn't say Mrs. Eversley makes a speciality of her own nation. It's rather a cosmopolitan crowd, isn't it? . . . and most celebrities of one sort or another." And she pointed out some well-known figures of the Paris art-world. "I don't know that I care much for artists, do you? But perhaps," she added apologetically, "you are one yourself, though you don't look it."

"Oh, I'm not enough of a one to count," he smiled. "But what's wrong with them?"

"Nothing; except one finds them rather self-absorbed, as a rule. Percy Colston is an aggravated case of it. He's like the ancient mariner, the way he holds you with his glittering I. But that's not original. . . . It's what he said of some one who out-talked him. Art theories and his dog, Chicot, are his only variations of that topic, and they come in like a recurrent theme in a Bach fugue. You don't know Chicot? Then your Colston education's been neglected. If anybody ever elopes with poor Percy—he's in deadly fear some one will—Chicot will have to be included, like Mrs. Browning's Flush." And she laughed gaily. "Oh, Mr. Colston is *quite* amusing, I assure you. Mrs. Eversley prizes him above her best china, and, of course, he treats her like a bad child. You saw how he forgot himself a while ago, I suppose? It's the only way he ever *does* forget himself, I admit. His chord of self isn't the kind that trembles out of sight. He and Monica don't get on, she leaves him to her mother. But then she's like me—she prefers art to artists."

"Yes, I've heard she does something in it—it's enamelling, isn't it?"

"You haven't seen her things in this year's Salon, then? She's quite successful, you know. Her work makes her independent of her mother. Mrs. Eversley holds it's vulgar to want to earn money. But I think that's because she urges Monica to go into society

... *now*. She didn't use to, and that's what's so strange. I remember when I first came to Paris I thought Mrs. Eversley was her own daughter, so to speak. She never admitted she was old enough to have one. I think Monica must have been locked up in a dark room, those days. She's just begun to be a little in evidence."

Harding was rather taken with this gay frankness. "But is Mrs. Eversley really grown up? She's astonishingly youthful, I thought."

"She's astonishing in a good many ways," was the answer. "I fancy she wants Monica to marry. It's one way of solving the daughter difficulty, you know."

"But I was given to understand," he answered, "that Miss Eversley was in the way of solving that for herself. She struck me as having the 'engaged' air. You see it generally. Such girls are either so nice to you that you feel it's an overflow, or they snuff you out without provocation. Isn't there a sculptor—a Monsieur Fernet—who's being attentive?"

"Yes; it's the man she was talking to when I introduced you. He's the pupil of Saint Marceaux. He came back from Italy this winter. Mr. Colston and he have an apartment together in the rue St. Honoré, though I don't see the bond, unless it's because Percy poses for him. He's very nice—I mean Monsieur Fernet—though he stutters a bit. Really I don't know whether it's a case of understanding or misunderstanding between him and Monica. It's gone on for years, anyway. Perhaps it's because he's tongue-tied it hasn't

come to anything. You know if you hesitate you're lost. Though I think it's Percy Colston that's the trouble. It's like him to interfere," she concluded, a little spitefully.

"But why should he?"

"Oh, but don't you see?" And she regarded him with amused eyes. "If Monica married Monsieur Fernet, it would break up their household. It's a selfish way for Percy to look at it . . . but then he's a poet. He rules all his friends, you know. It would be *such* a solution if only he'd marry Mrs. Eversley. Of course, there's the difference of their ages."

And she sighed with an air that suggested she would like to give points to Providence.

"But Mrs. Eversley doesn't show her age."

"Yes; but I don't know that she wants to marry. She might be a kind of married older sister—fill the place vacated by poor Kate Colston. You ought to have known his sister Kate. They had a flat together—hardly big enough for one. They were always entertaining, however, with screens and things, to hide the makeshifts. They had to deceive to receive, I suppose you'd say. And how people did fall over the deceptions!" She laughed with the recollection. "There was a sword over the fireplace that belonged to his father, a famous colonel in your civil war. We called it *le sabre de mon père*, for Ajax's in *La Belle Hélène*, Percy was so awfully proud of it. Later, he was left a legacy. and everything prospered except poor Kate. . . . *She*

died, just when she was no longer needed. But she was always so accommodating!"

Miss Fitzgerald's reminiscences were interrupted by the appearance of a jester, jingling his bells for attention. He delivered a prologue in verse. After which the audience was treated to a Court of Love, in which the rôle of the successful candidate for poetical honours was filled by the author. He received the prize—a golden eglantine—from Monica Eversley as Queen of Love, surrounded by her ladies. The piece was a graceful composition, done in affected, archaic style, and it was heartily applauded.

"How well Monica acted," Miss Fitzgerald commented, after the players retreated. "Especially when one knows how she hated taking the part. It required art for her to crown Percy Colston in that smiling way. But here comes Isadore Duncan," she added, as she dipped into an ice a servant had handed her, "I love her, don't you?"

The dancer was arrayed as Primavera, in a robe of pale mauve, embroidered with song-birds. In her hair were daisies and daffodils, and about her neck a collar of violets. She held a cage of silver wire, filled with linnets, that she released, with charming gestures of farewell. It was a delicious pantomime, in the light of the declining spring afternoon, in which the veritable spirit of the year seemed come into the garden.

The dance finished the performance, and the audience, breaking the spell which the artists had cast

on it, arose, and dispersing, fell into gossiping groups. The actors appeared to receive congratulations. Harding, joining Miss Vanderhurst, went up to pay his compliments to his hostess.

Mrs. Eversley had, evidently, recovered her equanimity. The success of the entertainment seemed to compensate her for the jars that had preceded it.

"Yes, I think these out-door pieces *are* attractive," she remarked radiantly. "And then the weather was so perfect. You have left me your address, Mr. Harding? I shall want you, you know, to come to dine with me soon."

Miss Vanderhurst was preoccupied on the way back to her hotel.

"Miss Fitzgerald was speaking to me of Monsieur Fernet and Miss Eversley," Harding observed to break the silence. "She rather suggested there was some impediment. . . ."

Miss Vanderhurst glanced at him inquisitively. "I'm sure I don't know what it can be," she said, rather tartly. "Unless it's in his speech . . . Monsieur Fernet stutters, I believe. It would be an excellent match. He's well-bred, a sculptor of note, and quite comfortably off. But Monica is such a strange girl . . . I don't know that I at all understand her. I wish there was more congeniality between her and her mother. How did she impress you?"

"Well, frankly," he laughed, "she depressed me more than impressed me. I felt terribly inferior,

somehow. She's quite handsome, but I wonder if a mere mortal could live up to her."

"Don't try," she returned drily. "Let Lena live up to you. . . . It would be better for her than living down to Percy Colston. I wish, for my sake, you'd promise to be nice to Lena—it's one reason why I wanted you to meet her."

Her worldly eyes were quite earnest about it, as she turned them on him.

"Of course, I will, if you ask it," he answered.

CHAPTER IV

HARDING had expected the fair spring weather would inspire him in writing his book; but it was delightful to be out-of-doors, and besides that temptation, Miss Vanderhurst pre-empted his time during her pause in Paris. The spinster had resolved to take him socially in hand. The world, to her, was not allied to the flesh and the twentieth-century substitute for the devil. This last assailed those who kept to bohemian quarters and neglected people dwelling in the sacred Etoile district. It was a great pity, she thought, that he did not interest himself in the "right sort of people." That class—certainly not to be found in places where, apparently, Harding passed his time—stood as the panacea for everything. They kept one cheerful, for society was cheerfulness; to go about, demanded thinking of others instead of oneself. Accordingly she multiplied engagements with him, weaving in to her plans for his good the hope that he might encounter someone better fitted to arouse his sentiment than Miss Buttercup Baxter. She had not been serious in recommending an alliance between Harding and the tea merchant's daughter . . . she didn't see why he couldn't do better for himself than that. Fortunately, there were a few nice girls left who had fortune. And Buttercup didn't strike her as "nice," irrespective of

the tea trade. So when, one day, Harding spoke of having an engagement with that young woman to go to the races, she lifted her brows rather superciliously.

"You really *are* in love with her, then?" she demanded; and at his flushed denial, she smiled in a way that left him small doubt as to what she concluded to be the object of his attentions.

His acquaintance with Miss Buttercup and her chaperoning relative dated from the previous autumn, when they had crossed on the same steamer from New York to Genoa, where Harding parted from them to go on to Paris. The ten days on board had made him and Buttercup rather intimate. Intimacy with that young woman was not a difficult thing. She had a hearty way of taking people that easily won her friends; and if he found her Americanism a trifle crude, on the other hand her naïve relish of life, her good-natured, somewhat high-keyed laughter, which went well with her florid youth, made her an agreeable companion on an ocean trip. When later she appeared in Paris, he saw a good deal of her from time to time. Miss Baxter, on discovering him to be a writer, professed delight. She "hailed," as she would have said, from Boston, where she heard much but saw little of its literary set, and Harding's claim to authorship gave him some importance in her eyes. She demanded his *Adonis - Garden* with a dedicatory fly-leaf, and spoke so enthusiastically of the verses that his regard for her sensibly increased. The idea of proposing to her began to figure vaguely in his thoughts. That her

father was "absurdly rich," to use Miss Vanderhurst's phrase, was a notorious fact. The branch houses of Hiram Baxter and Co., scattered over the United States, testified eloquently to that. Buttercup herself took pride in the knowledge, to the extent of ingenuously counting the advertisements of "Baxter's Surpassing Ceylon" that, decorating the hoardings of European capitals, proclaimed the world-wide fame of her papa's product. She and her aunt, Miss Zenobia, were wont to make wry faces when served any other brand.

Harding was far from thinking he was of the class of vulgar fortune hunters. He told himself that marriage with Buttercup was out of the question unless sentiment warranted it. His sentiments so far, he was obliged to admit, were of a rather lukewarm order; but he liked her, and much lay in propinquity. . . . If he had no great love to offer, Miss Buttercup did not, on her side, seem the girl to demand it. Practical advantages, certainly, recommended the suit. From early youth he had been counselled by interested friends to make a marriage that would eliminate the grosser anxieties of life. He had resented these suggestions as a reflection on his capacity to work out his salvation unaided. But an increase of his pessimistic disbelief in himself and his powers, born from years of dreary slavery at his desk, had brought him to look more favourably on worldly advice; and experience provoked in him the dull conviction that the altitudes of art towards which his spirit strained in

theory, were left like mountain peaks to a glacial unrewarded isolation. It was not the highest in art that the world wanted or was willing to pay for. A marriage of ease would leave him free to devote himself to his best, without considering the depressing money side of literary occupation. His imagination, in tired overworked moments, had therefore played more and more with the idea. Yet he found himself strangely reluctant to take the decisive step, even in the face of what seemed encouragement on the young woman's part.

Things about the Baxters had, indeed, their reactionary effect upon him, causing him to wonder if, after all, he could endure the family *milieu*. Miss Zenobia was rather an impossible person, and her vulgarities had, he felt, corrupted her niece. The day at Auteuil proved an unfortunate excursion in that respect, tending to check his suitor enthusiasms. The weather promised fair, and his hostesses, who had engaged a drag, were resplendent in fresh *rue de la Paix* toilettes. After they got in the jam of vehicles at the race, a sudden storm came up, and everybody was drenched to the skin. Miss Zenobia and her niece took the accident tragically, as if it had been a crash in the tea trade. The scarlet poppies in the stout spinster's hat trickled down in blood-like drops as, object of grim dejection, she sat mopping her cheeks with her handkerchief. It was plain she darkly reckoned the cost represented by the ruin of her clothes. Buttercup made only the sickliest attempts to meet the good

humour of her guests, one of whom, a girl whose wilted finery was probably her only gala dress, amused herself feeding near-by horses with cherries. Harding scarcely knew which was the worse damper—the shower or his hostesses; and he told himself the Baxters sometimes failed to live up to the cheerful quality of their surpassing Ceylon. It was one of the occasions, he confessed, when Miss Buttercup was disillusioning; and he parted from her and her aunt rather coldly.

Was it his punishment for not taking the girls the gods provide, that events followed which put a sudden end to his social idlings?

The newspaper for which he worked had left him free, seemingly, to follow his own whims in the correspondence he furnished weekly. Hearing nothing from it, beyond the formal word that accompanied the periodic cheque, he concluded that his work gave satisfaction to the managing editor who passed on such things. Apparent security about the position had not made him lax in his fashion of writing—he had what is called the “literary conscience” and he always used his pen with care—but the eternal search after subject-matter was fatiguing and he was inclined to make the most of what he casually gleaned. He had not, he knew, the “journalistic nose,” to employ the odious office word, for news, and when it came to burrowing he was perhaps rather negligent. It was all part of the emptiness of what weighed on his spirit as a means of livelihood. He tried to take it seriously, because

what hung on it was serious; and the thought that the rest of his days might be concerned with that sort of task, made him sigh often with weariness of spirit.

But the day after Miss Vanderhurst departed from Paris with many injunctions as to pursuing the social path she had cleared for him, arrived a letter from his paper in which his correspondence work was criticized for lacking "snappiness" and "general interest," and he read between the lines that his recall to the staff position was imminent.

The paper, he reflected, had repented of having given him this chance to rejuvenate his faculties, widen his experience, enrich his taste—advantages which his co-workers could not enjoy. The leave-of-absence had only been a Greek gift. It supplied his employer with the excuse to try someone else in the position he had so long filled. The new candidate had probably made good with the opportunity. "Fresh blood," that was journalism's shibboleth. It was what the paper continually demanded to keep its vigour and brightness in competition with rivals. How many had come and gone in the office since he had entered, simulating coolness, nervous over the novel requirements of them! Young as he was, he was almost the doyen of the editorial staff—a dangerous fact, in its constant reminder to the paper that he was reaching the end of usefulness. Ten years, it was reckoned, wore out a New York journalist. And after that? . . . Who indeed, troubled to discover what became of the voluntarily departing or the discharged? Faithfulness

to one's post did not count. . . . He was well aware of that. There was even such a thing as being too faithful. His chief often referred disparagingly to those who adhered to the paper overlong, as if it were a self-confessed incompetence.

Perhaps the decision which now appeared to Harding was as much necessity as choice. Not to evolve out of the old worn sphere into a newer, higher one, was, in effect, to retrograde into the ranks of those who, venturing nothing, lost all.

He would throw off the yoke of journalism, stay on in Paris, fight fortune with his only weapon, what remained of early artistic impulse. And if he failed? Well, what fairer place to fail in than Paris, eloquent in its soft spring beauty, that seemed to say if he could only believe in himself, all would yet be well.

Before committing himself to the irrevocable, and rather to soothe his conscience than to modify his decision, he went in to see a friend whom he had made since coming to Paris. Nicolls was a young Englishman who filled the post of city editor on the *Paris Gazette*, a weekly journal devoted to the interests of the Anglo-Saxon traveller; and Harding was in the habit of calling on him once or twice a week to glance over the newspapers there on file and discuss matters connected with his journalistic work. He found Nicolls at a desk, strewn with copy just from the printer. Nicolls was always toiling. He reminded Harding of Emerson's saying that steam was only another name for an Englishman. Harding rather envied him his energy

and determined ambitions; success was written all over him, and he never complained of life's difficulties. He had lived his life out of England, Harding knew; his father, a collector for the British Museum, had died leaving him to his own resources. Without being good-looking he had something in his face which attracted; it was perhaps his sincere blue eyes, the quiet sturdiness of his personality.

Nicolls had, as usual, a suggestion for the next newspaper article—Harding owed much to the other's interest in his work; he also had some theatre tickets for him. But Harding came quickly to his point, showing the letter just received from the New York paper.

"Well," Nicolls commented, "it appears a simple matter. All you have to do is to adapt yourself to their demands. If the Salon isn't 'snappy' enough for them, then interview Edmond Blanc's jockey."

"One gets so infernally tired of 'adapting' oneself," Harding said, impatiently. "I've done nothing else all my life. I've done it badly, I suppose, like a dog that tries to stand on its head, yet as well as most people filling rôles not fitted to them. And what's come of it? Nothing beyond putting bread in one's mouth, and none too much of that, either. And in the meantime, everything that really matters to one is left to waste away. You can hardly deny that that sort of suppression is bad . . . that it ends in one getting atrophied, going on day after day, year after year like this. That's the trouble with 'adapting.' . . . One adapts too well." And his face gleamed with rebellion.

"I don't know about that." Nicolls objected indulgently. "It's a good deal in the way one takes things. There's generally something to be got from even the worst sort of sweating. That's where one's cleverness comes in. And you're clever enough, Harding."

He spoke soberly, seeing that the other was depressed. It was not the first time they had argued over these problems, without altering their opposing view of life.

"That's a way of saying one has only to 'do one's duty' to get a pleasant pat from Providence in the end." And Harding thought of the hopeful axioms of youth of which he had discovered the hollowness. He was silent a moment, struggling with memories of futile effort, yet lured by the vision of independence. He felt as though it was the moment when he must challenge fate or submit to a life of drudgery.

"I'm tired of all this bowing in the house of Rimmon," he continued, finding resolve come with his words. "I've had to think, write, breathe the meaningless and commonplace so long, I've half lost my sight, mentally, like fish in underground streams. One *has* to cut loose from the compromise, or become a compromise oneself. I wasn't made for journalism, Nicolls. I'd like to find out what I *was* made for . . . if there's any real art in me, for instance. No, there's nothing to do, that I can see, but throw up the job—tell the paper I refuse to write the twaddle they demand. I want to be free, trust to my best. If I don't succeed, it'll be failing, at all events, in a decent cause. One

should know how to fail, I suppose, as well as how to succeed," he concluded bitterly.

"But my dear fellow," Nicolls remonstrated, "your way of looking at practical situations is so needlessly dramatic. Why suddenly, without means to fall back on—you told me that you depend on your salary—throw up the thing that keeps you afloat, to go into such an uncertain field as literature? You ought to wait, I should say, until you've tested what you can do there. Patience is a great thing. . . . You know the adage."

"That everything comes to him who waits?" Harding smiled scornfully. "On the contrary, *nothing* comes to him who waits . . . too long. Better take the plunge and be done with it." And he rose, saying more lightly: "But I'm keeping your printer waiting. Nothing will come to *him*, any way, if I go on talking."

And with a laugh that had a dash of bravado, he shook hands and left the office.

The laugh was the froth, so to speak, on the ebullition of his self persuasive arguments. The ebullition died almost as quickly as the laugh did; and in the street he experienced some reaction as to his hastily-made vow of independence. Yet he knew that what he uttered, however rhetorically phrased, was less void of reason than he confessed. Nicolls, after all, was ignorant of the true position in which he stood, although he might partly have guessed from Harding's fits of gloom, inexplicable to the other's excellent balance of mind unless based on some real difficulty.

Paris struck him as never lovelier than in its misty spring-time veil, with the afternoon sun raying from piled-up clouds behind the distant Trocadero. He paused, on his way across the Seine, to watch the trim little steamboats plying up and down the current, the quivering poplars lining the river-banks, the glittering domes and marble shafts of a city that weaves its wizardry over the heart of beauty lovers and the river with its ripples and eddyings, like some finger writing ever obliterated sentences in some unknown language.

Harding, leaning against the stone parapets, mused on destiny and what it might hold for him. Was it better to remain and strive for "the best" in him, as he expressed it to Nicolls, or to return to a grimed newspaper office in a Moloch-like metropolis which had crushed out his youth and ambition? He wished, wearily, that some counselling inner voice could tell him in what lay wisdom. The old fear of life was on him, that strange, corrupting doubt of himself and his fortune, the feeling that in nothing he might do dwelt salvation. Nicolls had spoken of the "uncertainty of literature." . . . What he had meant was the defeating uncertainty in himself. Yes, he lauded, in his talk with his friend, the solution to be found in art. Had it any? What was art but the melancholy of the unattainable? Why add to the Niagara of books that had poured on his head as he sat at his desk, year in and year out, writing [about them as if the ephemeral flood of print meant anything really to anybody? What heartache of vain endeavour many of them represented, what

dreams of fame unrealized, what sacrifices of youth, what starvation on the part of those who had held the pen! What vanity to suppose it might be given to him to achieve something worthy of even passing comment. And yet not to have lived towards some higher hope, not to have tried to lift himself above the sordidness of unmeaning drudgery. . . .

Wavering between fear and hope of the future, the resolve to free himself from journalistic servitude seemed the most momentous he had ever made. He had grasped the spar that had floated to him on the sea of struggle, with the relief of a drowning man; and he had clung to it as the only thing between him and the gulf into which he had nearly sunk. He was astonished at his present temerity. He braced himself by a drink at a boulevard café, and wrote his letter to the paper; when he added his signature, he looked on it as if it were his death warrant.

Having dropped the envelope in a letter box, he experienced a reaction which demanded something to occupy his mind. He dined at a good restaurant as part of his defiant attitude towards fate; and then consulted, on returning to the street, a theatrical column. He saw that *Œdipe Roi* was to be given that night by the Comédie Française with Mounet Sully, whom he admired, in the title rôle.

He afterwards wondered whether something more than chance had governed his selection of the spectacle on the unforgettable night. It was certainly not a piece calculated to encourage optimism, he reflected,

as he climbed to his inexpensive gallery seat, which he had chosen less from economy than to be removed from the distracting worldliness of the better part of the house. The play was Jules Lacroix's version of *Œdipus Tyrannus*, an adaptation rather than a translation; and he had read it although he had never before seen it on the stage.

The polite language of the French had not robbed the drama of its seizing classic power. As he sat, detached from his surroundings, in the grateful shadow, it seemed to Harding that life towered in majestic outline, that small unessential emotions were engulfed in a great elemental ocean. He felt lifted, purged, to use the old phrase, made to face the revelation of infinitely tragic things. It was as if the hand of Sophocles snatched from existence the veil of pretence, showing the vast, appalling skeleton of its fundamental facts. The voice of the drama, rising out of the deepest recess of life, wandered on, a hopeless cry of the human, through all space and for all time. Only triumphant Christian faith could, indeed, dull the ear to that profound lamentation of Greek philosophy—and Harding had no such faith.

The piece was superbly set. The curtain rose on the stately palace front where Œdipus appeared to address his people, come to implore his aid in arresting the dreadful plague that devoured the city. Opposite was the temple of Apollo, and the details of ancient Thebes rose on the background. It was dusk, an oppressive, fever-tainted dusk, that mounted to purple daybreak

as Mounet Sully's majestic, mantled form emerged through the palace portals. Harding was familiar with the circumstances that preceded the drama; how Œdipus, the son of Laius and Jocasta, had, because of what the oracles predicted, been exposed as a babe on the mountains; and had there been rescued by a shepherd; had, in manhood, on the road to Thebes, unwittingly slain his own father in a quarrel; how, in solving the sphinx's riddle and thus ridding the city from that ravening chimera, he had been hailed king, and married his own mother, the widowed Jocasta, dwelling with her in tranquil ignorance of his lineage until the plague had broken out which was to bring about an awful knowledge of his sacrilege.

It is here that the play begins, with the efforts of Œdipus to find and punish the slayer of Laius. Step by step the evidence is pieced together, until the fact is borne home on the King that it is he himself who is the author of the deed. Jocasta, hearing the frightful truth, disappears, with an exclamation of horror, into the palace, when comes a messenger to announce that she has hanged herself. Œdipus, who has followed her, while the chorus fills the air with exclamations, staggers forth, having blinded his eyes with a gold ornament plucked from Jocasta's hair, and uttering frightful cries. Then, after a heart-breaking parting from his children, he goes forth, a wanderer to expiate his crimes, victim of the dark machinations of fate, sport of a merciless destiny; lesson and warning to those who trust to the moment's happiness, since all

are in the hands of the gods who weave life as they list.

Mounet Sully was masterly in the rôle of *Œdipus*, possessing as well as genius a presence strikingly regal. Even the violence of his delivery, characteristic of his acting, seemed to express the elemental emotions of the Theban monarch; and Harding left the theatre with the awful cries he uttered, in lifting despairing hands to heaven, still ringing in his ears.

On his way down the rue de Rivoli, Harding heard the sounds being imitated in sport by several gay pedestrians ahead of him . . . he surmised them to be students. It was done with all the exuberance of careless youth; yet as it echoed through the midnight street, he had the feeling that it carried *Œdipus's* lament into modern life, that it was the voice of tragedy the same to-day as in those legend-breeding times preceding that era of Greek art which seized on and moulded the theme into enduring form.

A profound melancholy filled him. The play had sapped the life out of his new resolves; it seemed to emasculate his will, blight with its ironic comment on human plannings. What mattered what one did or did not do? One was in "the hands of the gods." One could not alter fate. However one strove, the end was the same.

Yet, next morning, shaking off the obsession of the play, he applied himself to his book with an energy that came of recognizing the need to finish it as soon as possible. In it lay his only hope of solving material

difficulties. He had several hundred dollars still laid by, and by practising economy it would last him, no doubt, until the manuscript was completed.

He wrote slowly. Dispatch he had never acquired, in spite of long journalistic schooling. Even the prodding of necessity could not overcome the habit, which arose from his over fastidiousness about phrase. Style was his strongest artistic absorption. In the thankless exercise of newspaper craft he had clung, as though therein lay its dignity, to the gloss of expression, giving to each sheet of ephemeral "copy," the stamp of a critical taste. It had been deemed a fault in the office, where ease in turning out matter was valued; and Harding had consequently acquired among his fellow workers the reputation of being a clever but unready writer not to be depended upon in grand emergencies of haste.

Seldom satisfied with what he did, his uncertainty in writing was like an echo of his uncertainty of character's sensitiveness to mood and surrounding. Recklessly he tore up chapters to write them in different fashion until he exhausted himself, reacted against work, indulged in idleness while he waited for what seemed a more favouring inspiration. Thus his story had grown tardily, never seemed nearer completion. The end loomed like a mountain peak, seen through trick of atmosphere, that appears to retreat as one advances.

The plot itself had given him little trouble. It was a simple human story of American village life, drawn

from the recollections of youth, and in which his mother moved as the dominating figure. It was his tribute to her heroic self-sacrifices and high-mindedness, the sense of which had escaped him in boyhood, but which haunted him now, mixed with regret that he had so little appreciated her. None of his own pessimism had come into the pages. . . . He had tried to see life through her eyes, not his own.

CHAPTER V

AT Percy Colston's request, Mrs. Eversley had invited Harding to one of her Wednesday evening dinners for celebrities. At least, Colston had told Harding it was at his suggestion, and on the strength of it he had first invited himself to lunch with Harding, and had then invited Harding to call for him in a cab on the way to Neuilly.

Mrs. Eversley, her arbiter of elegance explained as they drove, was a beauty of the night-blooming order . . . she never properly unfolded except under gas light, and Harding, as he shook hands, acknowledged that his hostess looked very lovely in the glow shed by the wax tapers of the Murano chandelier beneath which she stood to receive her guests. Her gown of blended materials showed her perfect neck, encircled by a René Lalique necklace of small uncut emeralds; and the dubious blonde of her hair had a sprinkling of gold dust so it shone in a charming cloud about her delicate face, with its red lips and girlish eyes, a little vague as if from belladonna.

She welcomed him in a pretty, slightly timid way, like a bride giving her first party. There was something quite disarming about her, he had to confess, as of one who says: "I really *am* harmless, how can you doubt it?"

And with her soft, conciliatory hand in his, he felt it was unkind to criticize.

She was very flattering in telling him how good it was of him to come when, according to Mr. Colston, he was busy on a book. There were so many claims on one's time, but he would have to spare her a little of his leisure since, as Miss Vanderhurst said, they must be friendly. It was not a big dinner to-night . . . only fourteen. That is, if Elsie Fitzgerald didn't fail. She hoped she wouldn't, for it would make thirteen at table, and she was a little superstitious about unlucky numbers . . . was he? Indeed, she was always consulting Madame de Kansa, the great Paris *sorcière*—who, he'd be interested to know, perhaps, was one of her guests. She read one's palm in a most marvellous way.

"Ah, there is Miss Fitzgerald now," she broke off, as a mantled figure passed through the hall, "so we *are* saved."

The poet remarked it was always the least important guest who arrived last at dinner.

Mrs. Eversley gave him a chiding touch with her fan.

"Isn't he incorrigible, Mr. Harding?" she appealed. "He never spares anyone with his epigrams. Miss Fitzgerald is one of Marchesi's most promising pupils, but Percy hasn't forgiven her for not singing in his play. Now, you must know whom I've chosen for you to take in to dinner—Mrs. Emily Longford, the English novelist. You'll find her interesting, I'm sure. Have you met any of the others here, I wonder? That is

Madame Stenoff, talking with Monsieur Chélard, the composer: she is reforming our funeral customs, and has written a book on the cinerary urns of the ancients. When her husband died, she courageously mourned for him in yellow—after the Chinese mode. That sallow-looking young man is an Armenian actor, an associate of Lugny-Pöe, and a great Shakespeare enthusiast. And that is the poetess, Mlle. Dolores Lagrange—‘Mystic Dolores,’ as Mr. Colston calls her—whose volume, *Parfum de Lotus bleu*, the critics say, has such a wonderful sob in it. The two men by the fireplace are Herr Wolff, the Munich artist, and Professor Piranesi, of Milan, who is lecturing here on what we’d have been had we evolved from elephants instead of apes.”

She seemed to take quite a girlish delight in all the lions and lionesses she had caged, as taking Harding’s arm she led him forward to where they shook their manes.

The dining-room, opening from the salon, was furnished in Henri II style, with oak panelling and tapestries. Harding’s eye was attracted by the beautiful buffet, its doors carved with classic scenes. On this rested some rare old pewter and an antique dianandrie, representing a peacock, in yellow-hued bronze. Over the entablatured chimney piece, flanked by chairs of odd caquetoire type, hung a portrait, school of François Clouet, of a fleshy mignon, of the court of Henri II, wearing earrings and blue plumed bonnet, a white greyhound by his side, and in his hand an egg of Nurnberg he consulted, as if impatient for a rendezvous.

The table shone with discreet light, the silk candle shades the handiwork of a Japanese artist in momentary vogue in Paris. The centre ornament was a Capa de Manote triumph, filled with white poppies, repeating their pale note in opalescent lachrymatories, Pompeiian style, placed at each cover.

Mrs. Emily Longford was a discontented-looking woman, whose books Harding thought boring. Nature had played a little joke on a lady of unimpeachable morals, by bestowing a physiognomy resembling that of Catherine of Russia. The steel beads dangling on her corsage were kept in constant agitation by the matronly breathing of a bosom, the bellows' capacity of which was calculated to keep the divine fire going in the least gifted.

It was in the midst of a course that Harding, who chatted with Miss Fitzgerald on his right, was recalled to the duties he owed to the novelist, by having her observe querulously:

"What an extraordinary glow the candles shed. It's almost cadaverous. Mrs. Eversley seems the only one proof against it. But that wonderful complexion of hers is, I imagine, equal to anything. I'm not surprised her daughter has taken up enamelling . . . she probably inherits the taste from her mother. I question, though, if she'll ever achieve such a masterpiece as Mrs. Eversley."

Harding glanced about him. The effect of the candles was rather greenery-yallery, as he expressed it to himself, now his attention was called to it—suggesting that the guests were in an incipient stage of chlorosis.

Mrs. Eversley alone, as Mrs. Longford bitterly noted, remained unaffected. Her beauty glowed triumphant in rosy light. Then some confidences of Percy Colston on their way to the house came back to him. . . . How he had suggested to Mrs. Eversley the device of exalting her looks at the expense of her guests by employing such candle shades at her dinner table. He wondered at this inhospitable vanity, which did not even spare her own daughter. Certainly, as the poet affirmed, she had not the temperament of the mother. The reflection caused him some reaction from the sentiment inspired by his talk with her.

"She is a masterpiece, isn't she?" he responded lightly. "But perhaps she 'makes up' for lost time, as Gilbert says in the *Bab Ballads*. You know she isn't as young as she looks."

The novelist, who looked older than she was, was still resentful of her hostess. "I should say all her time was lost time," she replied. "I wonder a woman of her light tastes cares to collect intellectual people about her. These talked-of 'Wednesday dinners' of hers are to me one of the many incongruities of Parisian life."

"At least the lightness is reflected in the pastry," he returned as he broke the *vol-au-vent* on his plate. "Why ask too much of dinner givers? A good menu is the main thing in a hostess. One prefers it to a feast of reason and the blunders of a bad cook. At all events, that appears to be the opinion of Monsieur Chélard."

The composer, who had a bon-vivant's visage, was

quoting, to Mrs. Eversley, Rossini, prince of gourmands, in support of the theory that the stomach was the musical conductor of the passions.

"An empty stomach," he was saying, "is like a bassoon, which growls with discontent, or a piccolo flute, expressing its desires in shrill tones. A full stomach, on the other hand, is the triangle of pleasure, the drum of joy. To eat, love, sing, digest . . . these, madame, as the composer maintains, are the four acts of the comic opera, called Life, and who lets his day pass without enjoying them, lacks wisdom. Yes, *chère* madame, the table was meant to be an art. As Savarin puts it, 'Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are.' "

"Yes, but Monsieur Chélarde," said his hostess with pretty earnestness, "how difficult it is to tell *what* one eats, nowadays. I remember, last week, at Baroness von Schneider's dinner, how each course was like a charade. One had to guess what it was, and then it generally wasn't. You know how *fin-de-siècle* she is, how complicated. I've heard her *chef* reads Ibsen, which may account for his morbid taste in menus—they're quite like problem plays. For my part, I like simple food. . . ."

"I agree with you, Madame Eversley," said the lady who mourned in yellow as a protest against crape. "It's what I'm always urging—simplicity in diet. When I write I restrict myself to a daily portion of Persian rice, prepared according to a recipe learned from the Parsees. I find rice produces mental exalta-

tion. Monsieur Chélard will pardon me—I am not a musician.”

“Few authors are music lovers,” observed the author of the *Elephant-Man versus the Homo Caudatus*. “You remember how Gautier and other French *littérateurs* felt the same. I confess, frankly, I detest modern music. It’s only a form of neuroticism, uselessly upsetting the nerves of hysterical persons. I congratulate Monsieur Chélard that he is a follower of Rossini and not one of Wagner’s neurasthenic apes.”

Music became the topic of the table. Percy Colston criticized the Paris Opéra directors for presenting nothing but Gounod and Verdi. He found the *café-chantant* preferable. “It’s ‘Variety,’” he remarked, “that is the spice of Paris life. Go to the Ambassadeurs, and hear Yvette Guilbert sing. Hers is the true art of the age, that hides tragedy in laughter, is the sadder for seeming gay. How symbolic her black-gloved arms. . . . One feels that they are dyed in the Eternal Night where she leans so pityingly, to embrace the lost soul of things.” He sipped his chablis pensively. “Monsieur Chélard is right. To live, we must evade, forget . . . and wine is one of the nepenthes. It is there we find the eternal youth of Omar. One swallow makes a springtime of the heart.”

The “Mystic Dolores” listened raptly. She suggested a Beardsley drawing, with her thin figure and strangely-arranged mustard-hued hair. Upon her filleted pale brow hung an oddly designed pendant. There was something about it which evoked em-

barrassment, although it would have been hard to say why.

She confessed that music was her great inspirator of life. Half her poems came of hearing it. There were certain 'cello passages of Schumann that painted landscapes of dream more wonderful than those of Corot or Böclin. She sighed: "Ah, without it . . ."

She did not finish, as though there were mysteries of soul-life too sacred for utterance. Some at the table seemed relieved at the reticence.

Mrs. Longford had heard her with disapproval. "Mademoiselle Lagrange, I understand," she said to Harding, "believes herself an incarnation of Cleopatra, and is meditating a trip to Egypt to 'lift the veil of Isis.' It seems she sleeps in a mummy case and marks her linen with scarabees—I wonder what her laundry-woman thinks. Her *Blue Lotus*, you know, was considered so improper it had to be published in Belgium. She appears to enjoy her neighbour, Herr Wolff, the artist who paints snails that look like human beings. I saw one of his pictures at last year's Salon." She shuddered expressively.

" 'The Rape of the Snail-Women,' wasn't it? " he replied. "One can't accuse his snails of being slow." He was tempted to flippancy by her solemnity.

Mrs. Longford stared with Anglo-Saxon misgiving.

"I presume that is what Americans call a pun," she said with crushing intent, "I'm told it is the highest form of your national humour."

"Yes, every race has its own kind, you know," he

agreed, unabashed. "With the French it's the naughty double *entente* that grace saves from offending. The German's jest is rather strong—like his *delicatessen*. The English idea of wit—or was it your Scotchman's—is, according to Dr. Johnson, laughing uproariously at stated intervals. That's certainly less of a strain."

"I don't sympathise with laughter," she replied, as though the speech was beneath her. "Human nature never seems so degraded to me as when it betrays itself in the distorted physiognomy of coarse mirth. That, I think, is why mediaeval artists gave leering faces to the obscene grotesques on their cathedrals. Life is no laughing matter, Mr. Harding. The idea that the world was invented only to be the subject of jest is what has destroyed the French. Their *blague*, as they call it, has poisoned their faith and slain their self-respect. Their civilization is a tragedy, for it is without God or sense of decency."

The table talk grew more animated. The egotism of personal predilections manifested itself generally. Madame Stenoff urged the aesthetic advantages of adopting, for crematory uses, the painted funeral urns of the Greeks. The Armenian actor drew a comparison between *Hamlet* and Ibsen's *Ghosts*. Madame de Kansa was asking *à propos* of the coming coronation of the King of Spain, what her science forewarned would be the young Alphonso's fate.

"I haven't read his hand," the seeress replied, with the air of one habituated to royal clients. "But I am familiar with his traits, that show the degenerate

stigma characteristic of the ill-starred Hapsbourgs. His exaggerated maxillary and consequent out-thrust lower lip are the abnormal facial signs of his house—and they only too plainly tell his end. All of his blood have had the same features, from the days of Charles the Fifth. Predispositions have been fortified by numberless consanguineous marriages. The Hapsbourg jaw is, indeed, so dominating that whether male or female members espouse one of alien extraction, the sign invariably imposes itself on descendants . . . though naturally, the female has the more strongly transmitted it—as is the case with all heredities.”

A fly had settled on Colston’s chin, and he brushed it off rather ostentatiously, as if to call attention to the classic modelling of that feature. “Yes,” he interpolated, “It’s like the Austrian lip of poor Marie Antoinette; or the nose of the Médicis. How Cosimo the Second’s descendants must have blessed him for blowing that famous organ of his before it hardened.”

“The degeneracy of the Hapsbourgs is undeniable,” said the Milanese lecturer, who had no patience with flippancy. “It only goes to prove how unfit the crowned heads of Europe are to rule the peoples confided to their keeping. I have always insisted in my books on the enormity of these consanguineous unions among those who have their feeble hands on the rudder of civilization. Marriages that carry on the seed of madness, vice, and other ills, have no excuse even in the face of the supposed necessity of nations strengthening their thrones by royal alliances. How much less have

private individuals right to pass on hampering inheritance to innocent, unborn victims. But science has aroused the world to a sense of that evil, and coming generations will act in accordance with its warnings.

"Yes," he continued, his eyes shining like glow worms through the glasses on his brown, dry face, "we have begun to accept the fact that there is no such thing as isolate personality. Every individual is consequent on the mental and physical self behind him—a mere link in the endless chain of evolution. The law of human responsibility is being strengthened. The fate of civilization rests on the cardinal obligation of maternity. To transmit that which handicaps racial development, is the crime of crimes. It is conscience regarding the physical side of life that will constitute the religion of the future."

The speaker paused to gaze about him, to gather, as it were, a plebiscite of approval from those on whom his carrying voice fastened the yoke of attention. Harding chanced to look at Miss Eversley. Her strange eyes, the colour of which so attracted him, were fixed on the drooping poppies of the centrepiece. From the expression of her lips, pressed together, he got the idea that she was crushing emotion. He wondered if Professor Piranesi's views had in some way displeased her. He could fancy her having rather decided ones of her own on such subjects. Her self-guarding quiet interested him—he would like to have known what underlay it. Her air, as she thus sat between the Armenian and Herr Wolff, gave the impression of one

a stranger in her home. Had she passed through some trying experience that had frozen the spontaneous, warmer woman in her? She did not look like one cold by nature, but rather through accident. He saw that Percy Colston was watching her with a faint smile of malice, as if he savoured some effect of situation. Mrs. Eversley, too, appeared agitated . . . she was leaning back, nervously playing with her gloves. Harding was intrigued over the vague suggestion of drama expressed by the attitude of the three in the momentary pause.

It was all taken in while the speaker cleared his throat in a way he had probably acquired from public lecturing; and he started to continue, when Mrs. Eversley checked him by abruptly rising, leaving her guests to follow her into the salon or betake themselves to the smoking-room for coffee.

On entering the salon, after his cigarette, Harding made his way to Miss Eversley. She sat in a bergère, near the Erard piano, over the queue of which was thrown a piece of old gold brocade that made an effective background for her dark head. Monsieur Chélard was at the keys, improvising. Conversation was taking generally a light tone, as reaction from the serious note struck at the dinner's close. Miss Eversley alone preserved her grave, preoccupied air of detachment from digestive trivialities being exchanged around her. Harding was less struck by her appearance in the simple evening dress she had on. It was of grey crêpe de Chine, and it did not particularly become her; and he got the impression she dressed effacingly

through a wish to avoid comparison with her mother.

"It's been an evening of suggestive discussion, hasn't it?" he remarked, as he seated himself beside her. "One has to come to France for the art of conversation. . . . We haven't evolved it yet in America. We're too absorbed in stocks and bonds and the servant problem there to give Shakespeare and the musical glasses much show."

He had thought the table talk about as mad as Alice's tea party, and his own strain to contribute a share had left a bad taste on his mental tongue. He seldom was his real self in society, being convinced that he had no genuine affiliation with it, and that his veritable feelings and thoughts had nothing to recommend them to the well-fed, comfortable class. To get the best out of people, one must give the best, as well he knew, but he persisted in his artificiality with the world. His effort at careless, epigrammatic brightness, he often told himself, was like fox-fire.

He did not know why he adopted this tone towards Miss Eversley. He felt it did not please her, that she suspected him of sarcasm, which was scarcely courteous to the daughter of his hostess. Yet there was something in her intelligent composure that tempted. . . . He wanted to arouse her, find the real woman under that calm. It was one of his inconsistencies that while sensitive to people's dislike, he often did his best to challenge it. There was a certain fascination in appearing to be what prejudice conceived.

She did not seem to think his remark called for any reply. Miss Eversley had the rare accomplishment of being silent when she had nothing to say, without appearing *gauche* or unready. So few people were able to resist the coercion of filling in a pause—cause of so much idle talk in society. Her grey-green eyes merely regarded him a moment in a casual, analysing way, as she took up, from the tabour at her elbow, a carved knife and played with it. It was instinctive with her, perhaps, to employ her hands, which were fine, dexterous and white.

"Madame de Kansa is a striking looking woman," he went on, "don't you think?" He had glanced across the room at those gathered about the seeress. "I don't believe she knows how to smile. . . . She reminds one of what was said to be the effect of passing a night in the cave of Triphonius. It must be a bit uncomfortable to have the blood of Norma in your veins—unless you make a point of prophesying 'smooth things,' which, I suppose, is what most people pay to hear. You believe in palmistry?"

"I think the hand indicates character in a general way," she answered. "I doubt, though, if palmists depend as much on lines as on their cleverness at deduction when fortune-telling. If one understands oneself, one ought to be able to forecast the future without need of a Madame de Kansa."

"But who does understand oneself? I wish *I* did—or why one is at all. It's part of the general mystery of things."

"That's scarcely a flattering view to take of oneself," she said, as though conceding something to a pose. "Most people find reason enough for living."

"Yes, I know we like to think there's a reason. We try to find it in religion or, in default of that, in science. The choice is a question which we prefer—the heart or the head. As for me, I find one as little satisfying as the other. I had an attack of atheism at six, I remember, and used to bury my head under the bed-clothes at night trembling at my precocious audacity. As to science, I've always hated it and its explanations—that never really explain. But you are interested in it, aren't you? At least, I got that impression from your air at table—I rather fancied you'd have liked to combat some of Professor Piranesi's views."

He regretted the speech, for she looked at him a moment as though he had committed an impertinence. The regard was proud; it seemed to him it safeguarded some wound he had dealt her unaware. To spare her any answer, he went on hastily:

"Interest in that kind of thing is, of course, a question of temperament. As I say, science doesn't appeal to mine. It seems to me it strips life of beauty and charm, by reducing it to a mere matter of physical laws. If, after all, it is only that, I'd rather delude myself, fancy it more. Facts are disagreeable things to face, as a rule."

"I prefer to face them, however," she returned as though she were being taxed with cowardice. Harding had the feeling she was assuming in his words some

motive beyond what appeared. From curiosity to know her opinions about things, he had drifted into personal analysis.

He knew he was impressing her unfavourably, but tormenting taste for challenging hostile minds caused him to continue.

"Even at the price one generally pays for truth?" he demanded. "It's not how artists usually feel, you know—and Miss Vanderhurst tells me you are one. For instance, there's the new view science takes of art—Lombroso's, I mean—that it's only the product of degeneracy and half-madness. It's rather depressing to face that, don't you think, if it's true?—and I can't help feeling that there is something in it. Art is trying to create the illusion that life is joy and light—and science would stamp artists out by proving to them they're only drones in the hive. Yet I don't see that it offers anything that compensates for what it robs the world of."

She did not listen to him very graciously, but he felt he had engaged her interest, antagonistic as that appeared. He smiled a little to himself in reflecting that, after all, few women are wholly unamenable to the compliment paid them in assuming they possess the intelligence to discuss abstract things.

"That ignores the fact science shows there is an evolutionary purpose in nature," she observed. "It imposes responsibility on the individual as part of a great design."

"But I don't see the design," he protested. "And

to be a mere 'link in a chain,' as Professor Piranesi puts it, offends one's vanity of independence. Science is so snubbing—in the way it regards the individual. It forbids us to think of our own ego. And, after all, one cares more about oneself than the race at large. One mostly wants life to feed one to the full—I know I do," he ended audaciously.

In speaking, he had fixed his eyes on her hands, that still played with the paper knife. They were certainly unusual hands—almost as white as the ivory ornament she held, with a distinct blue vein that, wandering from the wrist, was lost among the shapely knuckles. The tapering finger tips seemed eloquent of the delicate special craft which had occupied them so well. They were beautiful hands, and they looked practical in their fine way. Harding remembered afterwards how they had attracted him from the first.

"Ah, then, after all, you do confess to *one* reason for living?" she returned. He could hardly blame her, since both his words and manner had invited it.

"But life's bad enough as it is, without devising 'duties,' to make it duller," he said flippantly.

She regarded him with her curious eyes, as though hesitating to argue with such a trifler.

"You are quite hopeless, it would seem," she said after a moment. "Wouldn't it be fairer to find less fault with the world? I remember you complained, the first time I met you, of a lack of primroses along your path. Is that your ideal of happiness—to employ your time picking them?"

There was a slight in her voice, and he felt she viewed him as a self-absorbed, superficial lover of ease, to whom it was hardly worth while to talk seriously.

It annoyed him, although he could scarcely censure her for accepting the rôle he assumed. He thought to himself she might modify her opinion if she knew what a slavish grind his life had been. He let his eyes fall on the evidences of luxury round him. It wasn't difficult for her to take a superior tone. No doubt, she thought that her studio and her pretty enamels, her fashionable charities, justified her attitude of reproving the idler in him.

"Perhaps you'd attach more value to promises if you'd not been brought up on them," he returned with some bluntness. "I wonder how much you really know about life—the struggles of living, I mean. There's more reason for hopelessness than you're probably aware. Existence with a good many people is a losing game. Our hands are dealt out to us by others, one may say: I mean we're more or less bundles of hereditary conditions. We all haven't the Hapsbourg jaw as the outward sign of our handicap—it lies in hidden marks of failure. So many detrimental things are passed down to us, like ill-health, unbalanced mind, practical incapacity, that it's almost absurd to talk of being a free agent. One isn't free—one is in bondage to our forefathers. What we are, seems to me depressingly the work of chance. I don't suppose you deny that heredity lays its *morte-main* on people, that our character mostly depends on the kind of birthright we inherit."

He spoke sincerely enough now, with growing resentment against her as one who symbolised the advantages of fortune. There was a certain satisfaction in letting her have truth from the shoulder.

His words, or perhaps it was the tone in which they were uttered, seemingly stirred some emotion in her. She ceased to toy with the paper cutter in her hands.

"We can't ignore heredity, I admit," she answered, as though at some cost to herself. "Yet is it fair to lay all the blame of our failings on our ancestors? We have, at least, something that is our own—our will power. We can use it, if we choose, to remake the character for ourselves. That is, I think, a refuge from whatever is—unfortunate in our blood."

"You honestly think we can remake ourselves?" he said cynically.

"I shouldn't have much respect for myself if I thought I couldn't," she said, with eyes that deepened a little. He saw that her mouth had the expression which he had noticed at table.

The guests were beginning to go, and he rose. "We've had a rather serious talk, haven't we?" he said, as he held out his hand. "You've made science more interesting than Professor Piranesi."

He had fallen back into the light, half jesting tone with which he had begun the conversation.

The effect of this attempt at polite compliment seemed to revive her stiffness.

She looked at him, without responding, as if she

regretted the earnestness of her last words. And again he admired her art of being silent when she chose.

"But I mean it," he protested more warmly.

Then as she merely smiled intolerantly, he added in rather tardy repentance for his flippancies of the evening.

"I'm afraid you think me insincere, Miss Eversley?"

After all, he rather regretted to part from her, leaving her so badly impressed.

"Wouldn't that be a liberty—since I hardly know you?"

"But that can be overcome," he said, unabashed. "You are at home on Fridays, aren't you?"

"It is my mother's day—I have no fixed one."

"Then I'll trust to chance for seeing you," he responded, taking it as a rebuff. And with a bow he turned away.

On his way home he wondered why he had laid himself open to the snubbing he might have expected. Did he really wish to see her again? If so, it was certainly not because they were or ever could be congenial. Yet something about her piqued his interest, stirred his ambition to make her like him, in spite of antipathy. He told himself, with an annoyed laugh, that he would cause her to capitulate.

CHAPTER VI

BUT he forgot her and his pique by next morning, when he thréw himself again into his work, seeing nobody and, indeed, thinking of nothing but his book and the necessity of getting it done with dispatch. Years of desk toil had bred the working habit in him, and he laboured on careless of consequences—the overstrain of nerves and depression which usually followed these mental debauches of his. While the spell of inspiration was on him, he begrudged time for needed exercise or seeing friends. Naturally fond of solitude, life had fostered the taste in him, and it was his disposition to seek companionship not so much when he was happy as when he craved cheer or sympathy in his moody discouragements. It is, after all, the rare individual who gives the world his best; and Harding was apt to give it his worst.

He had made considerable progress on his story, and, indeed, was rather pleased with what he had done when, one day, he was awakened from literary absorption by receiving a note from Buttercup Baxter, telling him that she and her aunt were leaving Paris in a few days, and asking him to come to dinner “to say good-bye.”

The news of the Baxters' departure had a somewhat sobering effect. He had not conceived of their leaving

Paris for some time, and he wondered if they intended to return. Buttercup had merely mentioned that they were going on a motor trip through Touraine, without saying what were their plans after that. Even if it were their present purpose to come back, he was familiar enough with Buttercup's gay capriciousness not to place any dependence on that. It would hardly be until the following autumn, if then. He knew that Miss Zenobia was tired of Paris. She had so glutted herself with rue de la Paix shopping, that her mental indigestion would require a long dieting before she recovered her appetite for jewellery shops and dress-makers.

His reason told him that if he intended proposing to Buttercup, it was now or never. In spite of shifting sentiment, he was fond of her, and worldly considerations certainly prompted him. It was the solution of his material difficulties, and if he failed to take advantage of it, had he the right to complain of fate? Yet pride, love of independence, the hope that, after all, he might achieve his salvation without such a humiliating resort, filled his heart with rebellion. He was glad to reflect, as he dressed for dinner, that, at least, he could say he *was* fond of her; yet he was conscious that had fortune been kinder to him, he would never have contemplated asking Buttercup to be his wife.

On his arrival at the Hotel de l'Athénée, he was shown up to the Baxters' sitting-room, where he found Miss Zenobia arrayed with the magnificence of the Queen of Saba. She was large and heroic like her

name. Her complacency about her appearance probably originated in the fact that as a young woman, and before stoutness set in, she was an employée in the United States Mint, where her face had been used as a model for a certain goddess of liberty ornamenting a centenary coin issued by that temple of Midas. Time had doubled her chin and the fortune of her merchant brother, who made it unnecessary for her to continue to earn her living; yet it was only natural she should remember the distinction accorded her earlier profile; and it perhaps justified her rôle of a goddess of liberty enlightening the world as to the superiority of her native land—a task she fulfilled with creditable thoroughness.

The present trip abroad—the first for herself as well as for her niece—was intended, in a way, to be a lesson in European disillusion for Buttercup, to correct in the latter any foolish notions that novels and other falsifying reports might have put in her head. Miss Zenobia had, however, strong confidence in her niece, and in their travels allowed her that personal freedom—precious privilege of American girls—she enjoyed at home. “What’s the use,” the sturdy spinster was fond of saying, “of our forefathers having fought and bled for Freedom and Equality, if we can’t be as free as we like and equal—to anything.”

Her chaperonage of Buttercup had, accordingly, been perfunctory. “Buttercup,” she confided to Harding, “doesn’t know what wickedness is—and she don’t want to know. I let her enjoy herself, for no

harm can come of it. One hears of American girls falling in love with counts and that kind of foreign cattle—but Buttercup won't. She's got too much sense. Besides, Hiram wouldn't put up with 'em."

She received her guest rather stiffly, as a rebuke for his recent neglect; but his plea of work mollified her. She had worked herself. True, it had been where gold flowed; but she knew it was easier to coin it for others than to coin it for oneself.

She informed him that Buttercup had motored out to the Château of Madrid for tea, and had not yet come in.

"So you've decided to leave Paris?" he said.

"Yes, I want some of God's good air," Miss Zenobia replied, caressing a necklace of gems, given her by friends, that she called her "love string." It had the effect of making her bosom look like the jeweller's tray, but she loved her love string, which kept increasing in length and variety of precious stones. Harding sometimes speculated whether she wore it to bed with her sunbursts.

"Paris is getting too stuffy for me," she continued. "And there's Sans Souci—(it was the name the Baxters had given their resplendent motor) "that we don't get enough use of—the chauffeur spends most of his time taking the chambermaids out in the Bois. I suppose Buttercup told you we're going to do the Châteaux"—Miss Zenobia pronounced it "ch'toes"—"of Touraine. We put them down as something we ought to see—though I don't believe they come up to our millionaires' homes at Brookline. After that, we

don't know where we'll go. Buttercup expects you to come along with us, as I guess she wrote you? And, by the way," she added significantly, "she's been seeing a good deal of a friend of yours lately—a Percy Colston, somebody brought here. I don't take to him much myself, but Buttercup says he makes her laugh, though that ain't hard to do. He's not been to his own country for ten years, he says, and, as I told him, he ought to be ashamed of himself. And the way he talks French, too! Now, I hope you won't get Parisian and forget where you're from, like him."

"If I do, nobody else will, at all events," he laughed. "You see, I still speak American French."

"I'd be sorry if you spoke any other sort," she said, reprovingly. "I guess it's living over here that makes Percy Colston so pert; he advised me to turn somersaults on a mattress, mornings, to get thin—said it was better than Marienbad. Somersaults, indeed! I nearly boxed his ears for him!" And Miss Zenobia's bosom rose in resuscitated offence. She was proud of her health, having, as she was fond of asserting, "a constitution of iron," and corpulence was her principal preoccupation. She wrestled with it like Jacob with the angel. But the inches round her waist increased like the love-string round her neck—as though it were a race between them.

Buttercup burst into the room in her cheerful, cyclonic style. Her cheeks glowed under a cloud of motor veil that streamed behind like the tail of a comet. She breathlessly apologised for lateness.

"Percy Colston and I've been out in the Bois," she announced. "You ought to have seen the way I drove him back—we nearly got arrested for speeding. He almost had heart failure coming down the Champs Elysées, though he pretended he was scared on account of Chicot. Chicot's under the doctor's care for neurasthenia and can't stand excitement, he says. Mr. Colston's too absurd for words. Did aunt tell you what he said about her iron constitution? That it must have been drawn up by Thomas Jefferson? That's because she's so patriotic, you know. He recommended some Delsarte that rather startled her. But they kissed and made up, and he brought her a cat's-eye for her love-string." And she laughed in her hearty way. "We expect you to go on the Touraine trip—they say the roads are grand."

"I'm afraid I can't," Harding answered. "You see, I've got my book to finish."

"Oh, bother the old book," she said, with the irresponsibility of youth and a millionaire father. "You might just as well come and enjoy yourself. Your work can wait—and you need a change."

She left them, to reappear, after a half hour, dressed as though for a ball.

They went down to the main dining-room, where their entrance created general interest. A Frenchman, at a neighbouring table, screwed his glass into his eye to get a better focus on Buttercup's brilliant looks and more brilliant attire.

"How that man stares," Miss Baxter remarked in a

carrying voice. "I believe it's my cheeks. People are always saying I rouge."

"Of course, he stares," Miss Zenobia returned comfortably. "Everybody over here notices you. You ought to be accustomed to it by this time. And no wonder. They don't often see anything that comes up to an American girl."

The conversation grated on Harding, who wondered if time would suppress the young woman's too audible tones in public places, and her taste for flamboyant attire that was even more vociferous. If it was only a matter, as Miss Vanderhurst said, of "sandpapering her down," he had depressing visions of having to order sandpaper by the great gross.

When dinner was over, Miss Zenobia joined some hotel acquaintances for a game of bridge, leaving Harding to a *tête-à-tête* with her niece. The opportunity, now that it had arrived, was not as inspiring as he had hoped it would be. He felt he lacked will and words, somehow, to take proper advantage of it. There was something oppressively commonplace in the little salon, furnished in Maple and Co.'s style with its sallow gilt and smirking satins. The *bisque* clock kept up a matter-of-fact ticking on the mantelpiece—it had apparently outlived interest in the love-making which hallowed the retreat.

"So you won't go with us on the motor trip?" Buttercup demanded, examining her finger nails on which a manicurist had laboured a good part of the morning. No one could accuse *them* of lacking polish,

whatever might be said of their owner. "I think it's horrid of you. You know your book is only an excuse."

It was indeed the only excuse he could give; the plea of a rapidly flattening pocket-book could not be advanced. Harding defended himself. It took time and ingenuity. But, at last, he put it in such a way that she reluctantly withdrew the charge. Then the conversation flowed into other channels. Miss Baxter gave a lively account of her amusements since she had seen him last. His offence, however, evidently lingered behind her conceding animations. And, after awhile, she remarked abruptly:

"Mr. Colston tells me you dined with some friends of his last week—the Eversleys. He said the daughter is conceited, and the dead serious kind. Did you find her so?"

"She's rather serious, yes," he answered.

"And quite intellectual, I suppose? I should think you'd find her congenial, then. Own up, isn't that why you don't want to leave Paris?"

"Hardly. Besides, I've only seen her twice."

"How about love at first sight?"

He laughed, remembering his snubbing. "I can't say that the sight of Miss Eversley had that effect on me. I'm not particularly attracted by 'intellectual girls,' you see."

"Oh," with an air of half resentment. "I suppose, then, that's why you like me."

"I like you for the best of reasons," he said. "Be-

cause you are you—and not Miss Eversley, nor anybody else. After all, does one ever know just why one likes a person? ”

Miss Buttercup looked as though she thought she could guess why some people liked her, though the fact didn't seem especially to disturb her. Again she regarded her nails, which were as rosy as love's young dreams.

It was plainly the psychological moment. Harding knew that it was—yet he let it fade. Miss Buttercup, her head propped by piled-up sofa pillows, was certainly good to look at. Her high note of costume, which had grated on him in the dining room, was swallowed up by the far guiltier floridness of the little salon. There was a pleasant animal health about Miss Buttercup Baxter—and she promised to be handsomer after a year or two. She was rather tall, and she carried herself well. An abundance of chestnut hair fell attractively about her bright cheeks, a little freckled by sun, for she was fond of being out of doors, and excelled in golf and tennis. She declared that she had never been ill nor bored—and everything about her endorsed this.

The catechising had come after a considerable interval of time, during which she had, among other topics, touched on his literary work. It was rather a worn subject between them, one she often broached, no doubt to please him and make herself agreeable. He had rather liked discussing his story with her; for she was not lacking in intelligence, and her criticisms had the good sense that might be expected of a successful

business man's daughter. But to-night it bored Harding; he felt the gulf between them. What would their relations be, spiritually speaking, except that of a Pyramus and Thisbe—whispering through the crevice of a wall? After all, could anything compensate for a marriage of half sympathies?

Yet he still intended to propose to her.

He even started to frame the words, as the lateness of the hour, registered by the over-ornamental time-piece, warned him his chance was slipping by. Something checked the declaration. The hands of the clock, on which he fixed his eyes, seemed to make mesmeric passes, paralysing his tongue as he sought to shape the phrases of love.

"You're coming back to Paris, I suppose?" he faltered, grasping at that straw of procrastination.

"I don't know." Her tone was stiff. "We haven't made any plans beyond the motor trip. Aunt wants to go to Marienbad, and I'm thinking of taking singing lessons in Berlin, next winter."

"So it's good-bye. . . ."

"Yes—unless you change your mind, and join us in the Touraine tour. I think," she added, after a little pause, "of asking Percy Colston, in case you don't."

He felt a jealous twinge. "You know him well enough for that?"

"I suppose you mean, does he know me well enough to accept?" and she gave a slight laugh, that showed she had her touch of cynicism. "I guess he will. . . . People like motoring whether or not they like you.

And he's called three times," she concluded, as if that was intimacy.

Harding wondered how she had met him, but he did not inquire. Colston hadn't lost any time in getting on the Baxters' trail. The thought of a friendship between Buttercup and the poet annoyed him, as if it were an infringement of personal rights.

He made no reply, and she added: "Of course, I'd much rather have you."

It was uttered with conciliatory sweetness, but he had not mastered his pique, and he returned formally,

"No doubt you'll find him quite amusing."

His annoyance seemed to give her pleasure—perhaps she augured a change of mind on his part as the result of it. But she refrained from pressing him further, and talked animatedly about the roads, the best hotels to stop at, and the likely diversions by the way. It was not until parting that she reiterated: "If you change your mind . . ."

She said it rather oddly, and without looking at him.

At last he was out in the street—and he had not spoken. The clear night was refreshing in its velvety coolness, after the stuffy atmosphere of the hotel. The daffodil-coloured lights of the Boulevards sparkled gaily through the gloom. There was exhilaration in it all—the brilliant *cafés*, the crowds emptying from the theatres, the cries of camelots, the sense of living, at full pulse, that frothed like champagne in a cup. Harding felt his blood stir in response. He had not spoken, he was still free. Liberty never seemed so

dear as at that moment, when he had come so near losing it by an act that might or not have been best—he did not know. He only felt the intoxication of his freedom—freedom to do as he chose, to seek his way through life as his instincts dictated. A feeling of pride, of talent, flooded his heart. He would not accept the mean bribes of life, yield to caressing servitudes. He was, and would remain, true to himself. And as his mood threw the challenge to fate, he felt, like a vibrant chord, that thrill of egotism which sometimes exalts us in the face of desperate situations.

Yet, on his return to his room, he experienced the reaction which so often followed his mental exaltations. He had seated himself at his desk, in a mood to continue the chapter on which he had laboured before going out that evening. He had been pleased with what he had written: now as he glanced over it, it struck him as poor, without effect. In the intervening hours its seeming gold had turned to dross. With a feeling of oppression he turned back, glancing over this or that page of the manuscript. All appeared to have undergone some subtle chemical change, like paints that when applied glow richly only to fade to false, sickly tones after they are dry.

So the book on which rested his salvation, was nothing, after all! He had taken midnight coin of the elves—to wake on the morning and find the wealth a handful of leaves.

He thrust the manuscript aside roughly, and sat staring before him. He seemed to see the long, white

road of the years; himself plodding on, with burdened shoulders, parched with choking dust. Courage dropped like a mantle that had broken its clasp, leaving him to the chill of realities. Was not artistic aspiration, all aspiration, but the device of life to lure him on to his own defeat? For a few trivial sheets of writing, that the world would scorn, he had rejected ease and the end of the futile struggle to live through and by his own efforts. How wearisome was poverty, how wearisome, in truth, was everything!

He got up, after a while, and went out on his balcony. The air was full of stars dimmed by the glory of a full moon that lay in the west like a magnolia blossom afloat on enchanted waters. He could see the vast silhouette of Notre Dame rising, a film-like mass, in the mild silver-misted night.

He thought of the centuried grotesques that watched from those shadowy pinnacles. He knew them all, from many a toilsome climb up the winding stone steps that lead to the soaring inferno of mediæval genius, knew them from musing hours when, like hundreds of others, he gazed down on Paris, pondering over it, pondering over life.

He had called Notre Dame "His Lady," feeling sometimes that its shadow fell like a benediction on work and dreams. Yet was it not rather "the exceeding high mount" of the Tempter? It was there, leaning over the parapets, that the sadness and mockery of life oftenest came to him—there, amongst the leering demons, that host of nightmare creatures, chewing the

cud of evil merriment, jesting over that thing called man, the human farce enacted under their eyes. The Styge, arch fiend of the unclean rout, thrusting its tongue out derisively as it kept watch through the years, had seemed to whisper devilish counsel. There had been times, he knew, when that Walpurgisnacht atmosphere of unholy creatures tempted to madness—times when he fled the influence of their perpetual Sabbath lest his courage, his hope, his manliness be overpowered. Notre Dame . . . it was, in sooth, a “Mountain of Mystery.”

As he watched and mused, lounging on his balcony, the unrests that took him on his Dantesque pilgrimages to that heaven-high Hell filled his heart. He was of an age on which lay the heavy weight of material necessity. And he . . . was only a dreamer, that was the supreme mockery—a dreamer, with no right to dream!

CHAPTER VII

UNDER the impulse of reaction, he wrote a note, telling Buttercup that he would accept her invitation. But his night's rest changed the mood, and he did not send it. He had forgotten to ask what day she was leaving Paris, and when he called at her hotel the next afternoon, he learned that the Baxters had already left. It was more of a shock than he would have supposed, and following close upon it came the idea of calling upon Miss Eversley, which impulse he obeyed without stopping to analyse it.

Miss Eversley was out, but the servant said he would see if Mrs. Eversley were at home, so he ushered Harding into the salon while he himself went upstairs.

As Harding waited, he noted idly the room's fine evidences of taste; the gilded chairs covered with good Belgian tapestries, the Braccia marble chimney-piece with a big-eyed Psyche by Clodion, the discreet note of colour here and there, the pieces of bronze and old Saxe.

Presently he caught the sound of voices from the adjoining salon, across the doorway of which a portière was lightly drawn. One he recognised as Mrs. Eversley's, the other from its hesitant way of speaking he judged to be that of the sculptor Fernet.

"But I assure you Mr. Colston didn't tell you the

truth," Mrs. Eversley said with some emphasis. "I never opposed your attentions to my daughter. Quite the contrary. But she is very much her own mistress. I can't control her, I only wish I could. . . . She has the absurd idea that she must devote herself to art and charities. She insists she doesn't *want* to marry."

He made some reply that Mrs. Eversley interrupted sharply: "But that's unjust . . . I am *not* under Mr. Colston's influence. Nor do I support him in his quarrel with you. I think him in the wrong. I tell you that, of course, in confidence. I regret it should be about Monica. Naturally, I shouldn't sacrifice my daughter's happiness to him. I promise you. . . ."

Harding had already coughed to warn them of his presence; he succeeded only the second time in attracting attention. There was a silence. Then Mrs. Eversley, pushing back the curtain, appeared, looking disconcerted. Harding got the impression that she thought him Percy Colston. At the sight of him, at all events, her face lost its guilty expression of one caught in a conspiracy.

"Oh! Mr. Harding!" she said, in a half-gasp. "How stupid of that new servant not to know I was in the little salon! M. Fernet and I think it cosier. You have met each other, I believe?"

He followed her into the next room, where Fernet had waited.

The two men bowed, the sculptor with evident stiffness and embarrassment, and he took his leave after

a few seconds of superficial conversation. As he kissed his hostess's hand, he murmured something about seeing her soon.

Harding expressed regret at having interrupted her.

"Oh, I am very glad you came, I assure you," she returned with a pretty shrug of relief which did not bear conviction. "M. Fernet called about a rather delicate matter, it's true, but for that reason I was not sorry to end the talk."

She hesitated, and he saw that she was weighing the advisability of correcting the impressions he might have gathered. That he had heard part of the conversation, she could hardly doubt, but it was a question of how much. Harding himself felt uncomfortable over the knowledge thrust upon him, that there was a quarrel between Fernet and Colston, and that it was about Monica Eversley. He was a little curious as to Mrs. Eversley's real attitude. He had discovered her apparently intriguing with the sculptor against his friend. Was it only a blind?

From her preparatory air, he saw Mrs. Eversley had decided on confidences. He doubted, however, that they would be genuine. She sighed prettily. He had learned that sighs often preceded confidences.

"You haven't any idea, Mr. Harding, in what a delicate position a mother is often placed," she said mournfully. "Miss Vanderhurst may have told you that M. Fernet is devoted to my daughter. There has been some little talk about it, unfortunately,

because she doesn't care for him, and M. Fernet has the French notion that I ought to coerce her. He doesn't understand us Anglo-Saxons, you see, or how we look on marriage. Of course I wouldn't, I *couldn't* persuade Monica to marry unless she wished to. But sometimes one must be diplomatic, though I hate it, in regard to such things. So to-day I have been soothing poor M. Fernet by telling him I would do what I could. Of course it was only to spare him. He's so nice, and I wouldn't treat him otherwise than sweetly! But what a horror I have of marriage without sentiment! I am too much a woman of heart to urge anyone, least of all my daughter, to such a mistake. Of course you will not say anything about it to Mr. Colston—" her confident smile was a command to his sense of honour, and she resumed with graceful lightness: "Now let us forget about poor M. Fernet's troubles, and have some tea."

She rang, and settled herself comfortably among the cushions of her arm-chair. Her smile flatteringly suggested that an intimate chat with him was of all things what she most desired. He saw she was satisfied that any unpleasant inferences he might have drawn from her talk with the sculptor, had been dissipated. He wondered why she should have troubled about the situation, unless it was fear of Percy Colston, and then she would have reflected on his own gentlemanliness.

"It surprises me that you are in Paris," Mrs. Eversley resumed. "I thought you, like Mr. Colston,

had gone on the Baxters' motoring trip. Miss Baxter is quite a friend of yours, is she not? From what Miss Vanderhurst rather hinted, I fancy I might almost offer my congratulations to you."

"Miss Vanderhurst can hardly have said more than that we are friends; that much, at all events, is quite true," Harding answered.

"Then it is a mistake?" She paused to gather reaffirmation, and accordingly read it in his embarrassment. "So I shall be frank if I may, and say I am rather glad. It doesn't seem—from what I hear—that it would have been the match for a man like you, Mr. Harding. You see I speak quite as though I were an old friend. But you know, Miss Vanderhurst asked me to take you under my wing. And young men do need us women at times! I am only sorry I've had so little opportunity thus far of seeing you, and we are leaving shortly for the seashore. You know Normandy, Mr. Harding? Yes, I should have insisted on your coming oftener if I hadn't understood that Miss Baxter had first claim on your time."

"It has only been my work which kept me rather close," said Harding.

"I am glad it was your work," returned Mrs. Eversley with a little air of earnestness. "Indeed, I rather wondered, after I met you, at what Miss Vanderhurst hinted. Nothing seems to me such a pity as these unequal marriages. And Miss Buttercup Baxter—that is her odd, Pinafore sort of a name, isn't it?—must be a trifle crude. A grocer's daughter, is

she not? You can imagine my surprise when Mr. Colston accepted their motoring invitation. They must naturally be socially ambitious; people of that class usually are; and of course Mr. Colston's position is calculated to arouse—well, hopes that would scarcely be confirmed by events. Percy Colston *couldn't* consider Miss Buttercup Baxter. He is far too fastidious, too privileged, so I can't help feeling it was inconsiderate of him to accept their hospitality."

Her sweet, semi-virginal voice robbed the speech of some of its ill-nature. He saw that she was uneasy about Colston and the Baxters. Was she in love with the "privileged Percy," or only desirous of having him remain in the family? He had "taken her up"; it would be rather annoying to be laid down for a Buttercup Baxter. Apparently she guessed his thoughts, for she went on quickly.

"You see, I am so much interested in my friends! After all, it is among the few things left us older women." She smiled with what he thought some courage; for Mrs. Eversley to admit the principle of age was a heroism. Still, no doubt, she suspected Miss Vanderhurst had told him the truth about her being old enough to have a grown daughter. "I am simple in my tastes. You see how I am occupying myself."

Still smiling, she held up a bit of cobwebby embroidery. It was not new, as her maid could have told Harding; like Mrs. Eversley, it had a misleading youthfulness. She rather liked to have it in her hands when she chatted with young men. It somehow paved

the way to her effective confessions. Mrs. Eversley's confessions were no more real than her complexion or the colour of her hair, but they had their peculiar charm, and she found they called forth confidences from others. There was a faint odour clinging about the little salon which seemed eloquent of pretty past romances. He wondered whether Monica ever entered it without duly announcing herself. He could fancy her avoiding her mother's private theatricals.

"But you must tell me about your work," Mrs. Eversley said briskly. "Miss Vanderhurst says your poems have been so flatteringly mentioned by the critics, I do wish you would give me an author's copy. I'm devoted to poetry."

He promised, looking more complimented than he felt. She went on to ask the usual questions, the name of his novel, when it would be finished, whether his heroine was a real girl or if he had made her up; and having obtained answers whose evasiveness perfectly satisfied her, she then wanted to know if he intended making his home in Paris, next asked how long he would remain, when he said it depended on his work, and finally demanded his frank opinion as to Madame de Kansa, whom she somehow felt he hadn't altogether understood.

"Why, I thought her so interesting that I went to interview her," Harding replied. "In fact, my very last newspaper article was devoted to her. She very kindly offered to read my palm in order to show me what her method was. I assure you, I like her

sincerely," Harding added tactfully, seeing the pleasurable excitement which brightened Mrs. Eversley's eyes and doubtless would have flushed her cheek if her maid had not already flushed it for her.

"She read your palm. What did she say?" Mrs. Eversley cried eagerly.

"Oh, the usual thing; that I'd make lots of money from my book, would have a real 'career' as she expressed it—in fact, she was so flattering that I can't believe a word of it."

"Oh, but you must! If Madame de Kansa said it, you can count on its being absolutely true. I believe implicitly in everything she says." He felt that this incident had made a great difference in her opinion of him. She was even more gracious for the rest of their talk.

Harding had some concert tickets which Nicolls had sent him, and it occurred to him it might be a politeness to offer them to Mrs. Eversley and her daughter. While he was still speaking of them, Monica entered the house, and her mother called her to the salon.

Monica had already had tea; she had been with Elsie Fitzgerald talking of the *Amies des Pauvres*. Mrs. Eversley threw in what he imagined was a characteristic deprecatory remark about these working crazes among modern society girls. Miss Eversley frowned slightly, as if she resented such personalities before a stranger, and Harding understood Miss Vanderhurst's comment on the lack of congeniality

between mother and daughter. To change the distasteful subject, Mrs. Eversley asked if Monica would go to hear Ysaye on the following Thursday, since Mr. Harding had kindly offered to take them; Monica refused on the plea of a Working Girls' Club.

Harding got up to go. Mrs. Eversley pressed his hand with pleasant warmth.

"If we don't see you again before we go away," she said, "you must come to see us next autumn as soon as we return. He must decide to remain in Paris, mustn't he, Monica?"

"I imagine Mr. Harding is the best judge of that," was all Monica found to say.

"But you forget he is a writer. You certainly agree that Paris is a much better place than America for a literary man."

But the atmosphere most favourable to literary life did not seem to interest Miss Eversley in the least.

CHAPTER VIII

THE fact that Percy Colston was motoring with the Baxters, of which Harding was first made aware through Mrs. Eversley, was confirmed by a pictured post-card sent him from Tours by Buttercup. Others followed, and all made reference to the poet. He was so amusing and useful: added so much to the pleasure of the trip. Harding smiled ironically, as he read these underscored ecstasies. As the days passed, the post-cards (Harding asked himself if they had not a grain of malice) fluttered to him less frequently. At last, they ceased altogether.

Meanwhile, he had applied himself so determinedly to his book that he got it done. Having dispatched it to an American firm, with which he had had some dealing on the subject, he would gladly have recalled it—circumstances permitting—through artist dissatisfactions. But art was long, his pocket short—so short, indeed, that he had been forced to ask for a sum down in case of acceptance. The amount demanded was modest, but even so it was a venturesome stipulation to make, considering it was a first novel, and he was not hopeful about its being granted. But the book was a gamble—his “last throw,” as he phrased it to himself—and he concluded he might as well risk the extra hazard.

The manuscript off his hands, Harding felt the blank of an occupation gone. He was consumed, too, with uneasiness about his uncertain future. This, with the fatigue following on weeks of hard work, left him in a state of mind unfitting him for any further literary efforts for the moment. Unaccustomed to being idle, he scarce knew what to do with his time. The craving for society was on him, though less for people he knew slightly than for those to whom he could talk at ease. But Nicolls was his only close friend in Paris, and him he preferred to avoid while waiting for news of his book. Nicolls had remonstrated with him over his imprudence in throwing up his journalistic work in the spirit he had, and pride withheld him from stopping in at that office while he had no proofs to show that his strike for independence was justified. He accordingly spent a good deal of time in long solitary rambles through parts of Paris still unfamiliar to him.

It was towards the close of June when, one afternoon, in wandering along a by-path of the Bois, he caught sight of Miss Eversley, seated on a bench, some distance in front of him.

Surprised, for he had supposed that she and her mother had left Paris, he hesitated, undecided whether to advance or turn and avoid an encounter which might only reward him with another snubbing. He had thought her manner decidedly unfriendly the day he called on Mrs. Eversley. But there is a fascination for some in the distaste people apparently have for them: it challenges human vanity to try and overcome

it. And Harding remembered that he had vowed to make Monica Eversley like him, and, thereupon, he continued his stroll.

She did not notice his approach. The picture Miss Eversley made, seated under a spreading beech, was attractive. She had on a white serge walking skirt and silk blouse, with a black straw hat, the broad brim of which shaded her eyes. Seemingly, she had sought the shady retreat to read, but the volume she had borne thither lay unheeded on her lap, and she appeared to be watching a squirrel that, stationed at a discreet distance, regarded her brightly, its tiny paws crossed like an elf at prayer. Her present posture had less of the stiff, young grace which had amused him the day of the garden fête, when she had left him to join the other actors, sweeping her robes across the lawn with queenly disdain of his trivialities. It had, he reflected, been a declaration of war between them from their first meeting. Yet to-day she struck him as more approachable and human. He could fancy her most herself in the green quiet of such surroundings. Certainly they suited her better than the sophisticated background of her mother's house, where Mrs. Eversley's artificiality was like an aggressive perfume. Her defiance of the latter's weakness expressed itself in her clothes, disregardful of all but neatness, her air that plainly asked for no masculine tributes of admiration. As he drew near, he saw that she was lost in meditation, and that her face had a trace of melancholy. He wondered if she were trying to solve some problem of life. No

doubt, she had her own difficulties, after all, and perhaps her cool composure concealed actual suffering. How little one ever knew the truth about people.

At his greeting, she looked up as though rather rudely shaken out of her thoughts. He had expected she would resent his invasion of her solitude, and he was surprised at the way she shook hands with him. It was certainly more gracious than when they last met.

At the movement, one of the books in her lap slipped to the ground, and as he picked it up he noticed, with some pleasure, that it was the copy of his *Adonis-Garden* for which her mother had asked him.

"I hardly expected you to pay my book that compliment," he said, restoring it to her.

"I don't see why," she returned, with a matter-of-fact air. "I'm rather fond of modern verse. A number of your things strike me as very beautiful—especially the lyrics."

Something in the tone with which she referred to them, caused him to laugh.

"You were agreeably surprised, then? You didn't expect you'd like anything. I can see that."

"No, that's not true. But I perhaps thought they would be different."

"In what way?"

"Well, more personal, introspective . . ."

"Morbid, in short," he interrupted, supplying the word he felt was really in her mind.

"Yes, a little so, I admit," at his air of insistence.

"They don't seem like you, exactly—as I've found you in conversation, I mean."

He seated himself beside her. "I wrote most of them years ago, you see. When I was a boy, in fact. That may account for it. I don't suppose they are much like me now." And a shade settled for a moment on his face, as he looked at the squirrel which had cautiously reappeared to inspect the two. He was not thinking of squirrels, but of the difference the last ten years had wrought in him. What had become of his earlier, more hopeful self, he remembered as vaguely as half the pieces in the volume Miss Eversley held. He seldom glanced over the *Adonis-Garden*, any more than he turned back the pages of his ripened manhood. He had laid aside his passion for writing poetry, with so many other things. Yet it sometimes gave him a pang to think the impulse was dead in him. Her words, too, recalled the thought of the one love that had been the inspiration and disappointment of his New York life. He had never tried writing verse after it had ended in the taste of ashes. It had, he was bitterly persuaded, snapped in his spirit the last of the seven strings worn by hardship, disillusion, and the dry-rot of living.

Then he went on with forced lightness:

"Time, you know, is apt to knock the poetry out of one, even if one retains the knack of rhyming. Besides, verse-making is a luxury few can afford, these days. To scrape a living with the pen, one has to write novels. They're the vulgar necessity of authorship. The

rewards are not magnificent, but, at least, it's an improvement on verse-writing. It's the commutation of a sentence of death by starvation to one of life imprisonment on bread and water."

And he smiled at her as he dug at a tuft of grass with his stick. He was not unattractive, with his long figure and thin, expressive face. There was not much of the "Man with the Glove" in him, as Miss Vanderhurst fancied, but she was right, at least, in thinking him gentlemanly.

She studied him for a moment with her sober eyes. It was evident first impressions had been disturbed by reading his book. One hand still lay on the volume in question. The contact seemed to plead for the soberer man under the one who uttered persistent flippancies. At all events, her face retained its new, more tolerant expression.

His glance fell on her hand, the shapely whiteness of which had attracted him on the night of the dinner. Where had he recently seen the same type? Then he remembered it was at Madame de Kansa's. While waiting in her ante-room, he had picked up among the curiosities on the table, a plaster cast of the hand of the Marquise de Brinvilliers, the seventeenth-century poisoner. How similar the two hands were. But he was sceptical of chiromancy, and it made no particular impression on him. He merely thought of the freaks that Nature plays.

"But if you have such discouraged views of writing, why make it your profession?" Miss Eversley observed.

"Yes, I admit, it sounds disgruntled," he said, with a shrug; "the kind of thing the fox says of the grapes that hang too high. It's confessing oneself a failure in art, isn't it? But I can't say I'm a 'failure' in it yet, since I haven't given failure a chance. I've just sent my first novel to an American publisher, and as I forecast what will happen, I can't take an optimistic tone about literature. My excuse for going into it, is that it was necessity, not choice. I tried a number of honest livelihoods with ignominious results. All the builders rejected me as a worthless stone, so there was nothing to do, it seemed, but dip pen in ink-bottle, see if what apparently was my only talent might gather some interest. It was better than wrapping it up in a napkin, no doubt."

She made no comment and he went on:

"You see, life doesn't give people much choice in the matter of what they do. They do what they can. Often what they can't. And, after all, as to literature, it isn't a holy place any more. One needn't take off shoes there—one's constant struggle is to keep one's coat on. It isn't as though one waited for a voice out of heaven saying 'Write.' We aren't Saint Johns: we don't pretend to be inspired. My warrant is that if I hadn't gone into it I'd probably have starved. It's the shabby-genteel resort of desperation. Really, it's absurd to take book-writing seriously, you know, Miss Eversley, when its mostly to furnish amusement for brokers on their way home in the train, for housewives with a moment to spare when the roast's browning.

Anybody is justified in taking it up, if only he's clever enough to compound the sort of thing wanted, so that it pays." And his eyes, though morose, challenged her humorously.

"I don't believe that's quite the spirit in which you write, Mr. Harding," she said. "At least, the reason why you wrote what's here." And her hand again rested on the *Adonis-Garden* as though she were soothing its injured feelings. Her voice was kind, perhaps too kind, since it almost suggested pity for one who took himself so lightly.

He might have resented her tone in another mood. But he was glad of an ear lent to his destructive self-analysis, his discontent with himself, and his inaptitude for getting the better of life as others did. He was sincere, for the moment, in regretting his lack of what he considered the necessary "bunco" that makes existence the successful and comfortable thing it can be.

"Well, perhaps not," he conceded with a laugh, that was as bad a failure as he sometimes thought himself. "And that's why the book I've just sent across the water will, no doubt, come back to me again like the traditional bread. Though, to be honest, it's written in a would-be money-making, 'popular' vein. Only I did please myself trying to give it style. After all, the public sometimes *does* forgive a book being well-written."

With the sunlight of early summer filtering through the leaves, the spot was suggestive of a decidedly diffe-

rent order of talk. Miss Eversley had nothing of the coquette, it was true, but few women are entirely unconscious of their youthful good looks, and she was assuredly good-looking in a stately, dark-browed way. And he was not sure that, in spite of her air of indifference towards the other sex, she did not resent, a little, his lack of gallantry. It may be flattering to be taken as a girl of superior brains, but even Hypatia exacted some tribute to her human loveliness.

"I don't wonder you think me egotistical," he said. "But really, I wasn't posing. I have an abominable philosophy about myself. I wish I hadn't. If I could borrow some of your wisdom I'd count myself fortunate."

"But what do you know of my wisdom? When have I expressed any?"

"I haven't given you much chance, have I? It's rather in the unconscious impression, of being a person who knows how to fill 'a place in the world' which you have, and that I've never found for myself. That's the difference between us. You have and I haven't. And, that being the case, I don't wonder you feel towards me as you do."

She looked at him as though rather astonished at his assumption that she felt anything about him. He saw that he wasn't making matters better by this bold attack on her reserve. Yet he persisted.

"I've given you some cause, I know, Miss Eversley, for disliking me, I saw that you did, from the moment we met."

"But why should I like or dislike you? I hardly know you."

"Yes; but one forms impressions, and yours hasn't been exactly flattering."

"Suppose it hasn't?"

"Still one relies a good deal in life on the sympathy and understanding of others. Few are independent of help."

She mused a moment over the argument, yet without enthusiasm. "I don't know," she returned. "People don't, half the time, want to be helped. They only think they do. Besides, the cure for most personal things doesn't lie with others."

"You say that, perhaps, because you're exceptional." He deliberately flattered her. "It was what struck me, the first time I saw you, that you were the sort of person who didn't need others. It's what makes your friendship worth having. You know what poor, old, neglected Emerson says of the value that lies in the friendship of one who can do without friends. That's why I should like—should so much prize—yours."

But Miss Eversley seemed rather wary. She regarded him as if the question were one entirely of kindness towards him. The dubious look in her calm eyes, that suggested an unlighted stage where dramas might be enacted, was not flattering to the place Harding held in her thoughts.

"Isn't that just a mood?" she said. "I don't believe you really want my friendship. I am not even sure that friendship means as much to you as you say."

"It means a great deal to me: at least, yours would. I've had the feeling all along that you were going to be an influence in my life." He had the sincerity of the moment, and it infused into his voice a taking quality. Under his assurances there was, perhaps, the crude desire to vanquish her antipathy, but he was hardly conscious of it.

Miss Eversley did not, however, yield to his appeal. "But I don't at all care about influencing," she returned; and in saying it she, too, had the sincerity of the moment.

"But what woman does not want to exercise her influence?" Harding asked audaciously. "I never met one who didn't."

"You think that is what they were invented for, no doubt?" she parried.

"That reason of itself would be good enough," he replied, enjoying the debate. "We can't do without human contact, you know."

"I can do without it." And the proud way she raised her head almost persuaded him that she could. It had, at all events, he felt, been her effort so to live; and he wondered what unfortunate experience—what disappointment of heart—had fostered the unnatural attitude. She had admitted she thought him morbid. Was she not the more morbid of the two? Curiosity caused him to say, in hope of drawing her out:

"Then you can never have suffered."

Her momentary hesitation told him he had touched

on some sore place in her. "Everybody has troubles," she returned, with eyes that darkened a little. "Nobody's life is free from them."

"True, I have no right to say that, since I know nothing about your life . . . though I'd like to," he said.

But she only stiffened at the liberty. "I am not of those who get pleasure out of talking about their lives."

"You make me rather ashamed of having been so unreserved," he returned.

"Why should you? It's only that we're different."

"You are very independent, Miss Eversley. Oughtn't you to share with others the secret that sustains you?"

"There is no secret to share, Mr. Harding," she said simply. "I merely try to accept life like other people. It doesn't help matters, does it, to be so bitter about it as you appear to be?"

"But that's because I have no faith in it—I never could see where its reasonableness came in."

"Has it treated you so badly, then?" Her eyes intimated that she didn't think it had, though her voice was gentler. It might have been that she regretted her brusqueness.

"No, I don't suppose it has, really," he said. "Only it has somehow knocked all belief out of me. I don't think I had much to start with."

"Tell me a little about your life, if you care to," she said, as if to compensate for having seemed difficult. Or perhaps he had touched her womanly side.

"There's not much to tell," he said carelessly, "but it will, perhaps, explain why I came to Paris. I got tired of the old ruts." He hesitated, feeling half ashamed. Yet it was a means of putting himself more in touch with her, and his mood craved understanding.

He sketched his last ten years of New York life, without emphasizing the hardships; he only offered such facts as appeared to justify his futility, his feeling of hopelessness.

She listened with more interest than he had expected her to show. "I hadn't thought of things being quite so difficult for you," she said, when he ended with an awkward laugh, that was meant as an apology for his recital. He had the feeling that he had shown himself an awful egotist.

She was silent a moment. "Yet I don't see why it has robbed you of all faith in life," she added, with something in her eyes he did not understand. "Can nothing give it back, Mr. Harding?"

Her face had lost much of its coldness, and he said in an impulse, moved by the feeling her tone inspired:

"Yes, I think you could, if you wanted to."

"I?" And a slight colour came into her cheeks, that seemed surprise rather than pleasure. It faded as quickly as it came, and she said, as if to discourage idle gallantry: "How can I give you back something that lies with yourself?" And, unconsciously, her tone betrayed a touch of bitterness, as though her self poise had been born of that acquired knowledge.

"You can, Miss Eversley." He hardly knew whether or not he was sincere; but he had an odd desire to call out the woman in her, to see in her half-rebellious eyes a different look—the warmer light that belonged to them. It was all that was needed to make her really beautiful, he told himself.

"After all, a woman's friendship can do a great deal for a man," he went on. "The worst thing about life is its isolation, the dullness that comes from seeing nothing beyond drudgery. The fact of bread being nothing *but* bread. You know the miracle of St. Elizabeth. That is what some women can do for one—change the bread into roses, so to speak."

She smiled faintly. "Or primroses? It's only another way of saying what you did the night you dined with my mother"—(he wondered why she did not say "with us"?)—isn't it? Don't you make rather too much of a point of the flower side of life?"

"But roses—or primroses, if you prefer—symbolize with me the feeling of beauty that goes with living. Can you get on without it? I know I can't. I think it's losing sight of it that's the matter with me. And one doesn't find it in abstract things best, but through what friendship gives. That's why I ask yours. You must admit we 'can't live by bread alone.'"

"Nor by people to the extent you say. You pay others too great a compliment. It would be better if you paid it to yourself."

He took it as a rejection of his overtures.

"So," he said, with a flush of sensitive egotism, "it's true, you *do* dislike me, Miss Eversley."

"But why should you suppose that? I do not dislike you. Yet, in spite of the difference in our way of feeling about things . . ."—she hesitated. "There is no reason, Mr. Harding, why we shouldn't be friends, since you appear to want it so much. But what you most need, is to believe in yourself."

She rose, as she spoke, and he accompanied her, more affected by the concession than he would have thought possible.

CHAPTER IX

PARIS was precipitated in the stuffiness of midsummer, when one day, Harding received a letter which he saw, from the superscription on the envelope, was from the publishing firm to which he had sent his manuscript. Bracing himself for bad news, he broke it open and as he drew forth the contents he saw a folded cheque within. It covered the sum he had demanded. *The Horns of the Altar* was accepted. After the strain of waiting, relief almost unnerved him; for a moment he could hardly read the typed communication, confirming the fact.

Bentley and Company was a new and pushing New York house that had acquired a reputation for launching popular novels, and for having more "best-sellers" on its list than any of its numerous rivals. The junior member of the firm, to whose ingenious advertising schemes it owed much of its success in floating books on brisk, modern lines, was slightly acquainted with Harding, and it was he who had dictated the letter; telling him that his story was just what the house was looking for. The American public, reacting from a long diet of historical romances, was in the humour for homely, human tales of local life, and he anticipated for *The Horns of the Altar*—which would be

brought out early in the autumn—one of the successes of the year.

This was far more than Harding had dreamed in his most sanguine moods, and the prospect of entering on a literary life, freed from harassing need, had the effect of creating for him a new heaven and a new earth. Something in him, that for years had lain drugged by the opiates of discouragement, awoke to active being; and on his way to the banker's, to cash the cheque which came opportunely to reimburse his empty pocket, he meditated over a new book which, he vowed, would be better than the first. He would begin it immediately, and as change and tonic for work, would find some place outside of Paris in which to settle for the rest of the summer. He knew of a small hotel on the Marne, near a popular boating resort, and he decided, as he was fond of rowing, to select this as best suited to his purpose.

He had stopped in at Nicolls's office, to tell him the news and invite him to lunch, but finding him out, he had a solitary meal at a restaurant; after which he roamed about the neighbourhood of the Place de l'Opéra, left to the midsummer tourist, debating how to put in his time. As he turned down the Boulevard Haussmann he chanced on Percy Colston, who was coming out of a haberdasher's. Harding was in the frame of mind to welcome any acquaintance with pleasure, and his greeting of the poet was more friendly than it would have been in a less cheerful moment. He had not seen the privileged youth since the trip

with the Baxters, and as Miss Buttercup had ceased to figure importantly in his thoughts, he found it easy to forgive him for having, apparently, eclipsed him with that buoyant young woman. Colston told him he was staying with friends out at St. Germain-en-Laye, and as he had a half-hour to spare before his train, Harding suggested that they should have a cooling drink at Sylvain's, near by.

Colston told him that after he had parted from the Baxters, these had gone to Marienbad, so Miss Zenobia could take a flesh-reducing course; then they would travel for several months and finally return to Paris.

"But Miss Baxter told me she intended passing next winter in Berlin," Harding commented.

"Yes; but that was before I advised her not to," the poet returned airily. "She is leaving details to me now, you see. I am always saving people, and I've decided to save Buttercup. Crudeness is her note, if she learns to strike it effectively. I told her to come back to Paris and I'd make her a success. Her success lies in her voice. It has the real American timbre. I'm getting a friend to put Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* to music so Buttercup can sing them. She'll be the rage here chaunting the Saga of the States. As I told her, her capital lay in her defects, if she only cultivated them."

His condescending adoption of Buttercup made the other smile. It was evident that Colston had taken up the Baxters; and Harding wondered how Mrs. Eversley would accept the situation. He asked whether there

was any news from that rejuvenated lady since she had gone to Trouville.

"I'm always hearing from her," her fickle arbiter replied, sipping his cassis. It's *nulle diem sine linea* with her. She writes notes with the frightful fluency of people having nothing to say. She tells me that Trouville promises to have a dull season this year, so I don't know that I'll pay her my usual August visit. Besides, I am getting tired of asking people to accept her for my sake. Then, that walking Moral Tale, her daughter, is with her. Her Maria Edgeworth heroine airs always did get on my nerves; and, you know, I don't speak to her now, on account of her trying to inveigle Fernet into marrying her."

Harding recalled the fragment of conversation he had heard in Mrs. Eversley's drawing-room.

"She didn't strike me as that sort of girl," he observed.

"No, it didn't strike Fernet, either," the poet snapped. "That is where she's so clever. She makes advances by appearing to retreat. She'd probably have succeeded in taking Fernet in, if I hadn't interfered, and shown him that she'd kill anybody's career. Fernet and I had a quarrel about her in which he treated me brutally. But I've forgiven him—though, as I told him, I never could feel the same again. He doesn't appreciate all I've done for him. If I hadn't posed for his 'Youth' he'd never have got anywhere. Fortunately, he's gone to his family in Brittany; so he's safe from her at present, anyway."

He asked where Harding purposed spending the rest of the summer, and on the latter giving him the address, he said that he might be visiting at Champigny, in which case, as it was near by, he would come over. After which they parted.

The summer went by rather quickly for Harding. The proofs of his book arrived in August, and he was kept busy correcting them in the mornings. The afternoons he spent on the river. He saw no acquaintances, for Nicolls was on a vacation in England, and his other friends were either in the country or by the sea. One day, however, Percy Colston fulfilled that promise of coming over from Champigny to see him.

Harding rowed him to Joinville-le-Pont, where they dined at the willow-embowered Tête Noire. The talk was mostly on art problems which, as the other already discovered, his guest was fond of discussing in an authoritative way. It was, indeed, their most congenial meeting-ground, and Harding's willingness to listen to his dissertations evidently won favour, for the visit was repeated several times during the month.

Although Harding did not take altogether seriously the poet's opinions on art, yet they had some influence on him. He had written *The Horns of the Altar* in a detached spirit, more concerned with its style than with the theme, which, as he told Miss Eversley, had been deliberately selected in hope of its being popular. It was a *tour de force* into which, he believed, little of his real self had entered; and Colston's contention

that the highest form of art consisted in self-assertion, appealed to him. He recognised, however, that he had a morbid streak, and lacked a balanced criticism of life, and that these were obstacles to writing in a popular yet personal fashion. The poet derided the argument as Philistinism. An artist, he held, should write for artists, not for the crowd. The touch of neurasthenia to which Harding confessed, he lauded as a gift the gods bestow only on the elect.

"If you have nerves," he asserted, as he sat at the bow of the boat—he was not fond of rowing—"write with your nerves. Nothing counts but temperament. It's what American writers lack. They manufacture books by rote, according to a recipe, with an eye on the Ten Commandments and the fear of the God of Mammon in their hearts. There's no personal feeling and thinking with them. America tramples out individuality in art as in society. There's only one motive for a book, and that's oneself." And he rang the changes on his idea with a persuasive self-confidence which his auditor rather envied him.

His visitor's contemptuous dismissal of *The Horns of the Altar* as a work of no artistic significance—an opinion based on deductions since he had not seen the proofs—had its effect on Harding's susceptible nature; and he ended by being half ashamed of it, and in doubt as to his best line of future work.

Percy Colston came over one day in a state of great exasperation. He had been down to Trouville after all, and had found there Fernet who had pretended to be with his family.

"Mrs. Eversley is nothing but a detestable intriguer," he said. "I taxed her with treachery. She denies having invited Fernet, but he never would have gone on his own initiative. Fernet's like a lump of his own clay, anybody can mould him. Monica pretends to be indifferent to him, but it's only her way of trying to attract; she tried it with Nicolls, and didn't learn her lesson, either, when it failed to work."

"You mean to say Nicolls was in love with her?" Harding asked.

"He may have been in love with her, but love didn't take him as far as the horns of the altar," Percy returned. "Ever since I found her out, Mrs. Eversley's been trying to propitiate me. I live in terror of bells like a Matthias. Messenger boys with telegrams are ringing all the time at the house where I am staying—that's why I come over to see you, to get away from them," he added flatteringly.

"Perhaps Mrs. Eversley isn't as anxious to marry her daughter to Fernet as she is to marry herself to you. After all, she's still on the sunny side of sixty."

"She'd make me sixty if I did," was the answer. "I'm sure her husband died of premature octogenarianism!"

On another occasion, something brought up the question of transmitted tendency which Madame de Kansa and the Milanese lecturer had discussed at Mrs. Eversley's dinner. The conversation had lingered in Harding's mind largely because of its effect on Monica. His talk with her afterwards in the salon had supplied some clue to her air of opposition to the

ideas expressed; yet it did not account for the smile of malice with which Percy Colston had regarded her. Harding cited her views as being in favour of the self-assertiveness which Colston extolled. The poet heard him with scornful impatience.

"Oh, with her it's all argue, argue, and dodge facts at the same time while pretending to understand," he said. "It's a fond delusion—with that type of tiresome persons. But there's more in this than Monica Eversley cares to dream about in her self-contented philosophy. Her attitude irritates me so, that if I wrote novels, I'd make one out of this business." And he sketched a striking plot dealing with criminal ancestry.

Harding's objection was, that it involved a scientific thesis: and as for himself, he had no convictions on the subject of heredity, and was not sure that he liked books with a purpose, anyway.

Colston may not have liked books with a purpose either; but here he appeared to have a purpose for the book.

"Don't think of science—think of the tragedy in the theme," he said. "It holds almost Sophoclean possibilities. Heredity appears here as another name for the Three Fates, holding in their lean hands the thread of destiny. As I'm always contending, it's not so much what one writes as the way one writes it. Art can make even science dramatic. The trouble is, that most writers who select such subjects write with the point of a scalpel; they fail because they are usually not artists, but scientists, at soul."

And the poet garnished his idea with a number of details that brought it graphically before Harding's eyes. They discussed the suggestion for the rest of dinner, and when they parted, Harding rowed back from Joinville under the star-lit sky, filled with enthusiasm for the theme. It was one, indeed, which tempted him in spite of the objections he had raised—perhaps because of them. Much that was half conviction, his pessimistic attitude towards life—a blind maze in which the individual groped, the victim of accident, burdened by unescapable fate—could enter into such a story. He recalled the effect upon him of the performance of *Œdipe Roi*, which he had seen at the Comédie Française, how its art had invested horror with a vitality transcending the trivialities of modern literature. If he could but get a touch of such grandeur into his story! He smiled at the ambition. Yet one should aim high whether or not one shot low. It would be a pleasure to try . . . and he had taken no pleasure in his other book. How could art mean anything to others unless it meant something to the artist who had begot it?

His enthusiasm remained with him, and by the end of the week he had made a rough draft of the plot. He laid the scenes partly in America, partly in Paris, following the idea as he had discussed it with Percy Colston, who had disclaimed any intention to utilize the material. There was no reason why he himself should not take it.

CHAPTER X

HARDING called on Mrs. Eversley immediately after her return from Trouville, and she asked him to take her to the Opéra Comique for the première of *Le Gage d'Amour*, an opera by Chélard whom he had met at her dinner. Driving in from Neuilly, she was in a confidential mood, and spoke almost sentimentally of his sympathy and power of understanding, due to his inborn talent as a writer, which she had felt even before knowing all he had done. Of Monica, too, she spoke, and indeed, of most of her recent troubles, touching on them lightly.

“ Monica is far weaker than you think, Mr. Harding; she is very much of a woman, she was made to be loved, to be cared for. But she has such beautiful ideals about love, and it's her disappointment in the men she meets that causes her to fall back on her art, her charities . . . that can never fill a girl's life. She must abide by her standards. It was really to escape M. Fernet's attentions that she went to England. You remember, I told you last June how hopeless that was, and how sorry I was for him. So when he asked me to come down to Trouville, I hadn't the *heart* to say no. Perhaps it was unwise—I'm so impulsive! I couldn't have thought Mr. Colston could so misjudge me! He's so clever and accomplished, but a woman could never

repose in him the same faith as in you!" Whereupon she reposed very near his shoulder in a way which certainly promised well for their friendship. But more momentous developments yet were reserved for the evening.

In a box opposite to them, Colston sat with the Baroness de Chanzy, looking so markedly at Mrs. Eversley as he talked that he was evidently discussing her; and Mrs. Eversley struck Harding as a woman acting under the effects of fear rather than love—he remembered that Colston had once boasted of "knowing her story." Mrs. Eversley finally begged Harding to bring the poet to her during an *entr'acte*, and was so upset by the interview that she asked to be taken home before the end of the performance. Then, in the cab, she broke into a hysterical passion of tears which, dark as it was, caused such ravages in her youthful beauty that he wondered if he would ever be pardoned the revelation after she had looked at herself in a glass. He made the best of the situation, however, by taking her hand, and comforting her as best he might—he thought her groping for his hand, though it may have been only for the powder box; and then he made swift farewells at the door so as neither to see too much—nor to keep her too long from consulting her glass and seeing the worst for herself.

Next time he called, she showed no resentment, but accepted him on a footing of intimacy; and while her impossible blonde head had a droop which suggested that it required a more substantial prop than the silk

cushions of the little salon, she shed no more tears—doubtless her mirror's revelations of the havoc to her would-be youth had dried them up permanently at their fountain-source. Taking her hand, Harding assured her of his friendship and sympathy in her trouble with the poet and with Fernet; and they agreed that the privileged Percy was most unkind and tyrannical with others. On Harding hinting that perhaps it would be wise of her to try to forget him, since, apparently, he intended to forget her, Mrs. Eversley mournfully admitted that perhaps it *was* better; and so, by degrees, "Percy" had dropped out of their conversation as he had dropped out of Mrs. Eversley's life.

What had passed between them on the night of the *Gage d'Amour* première, Harding never learned; yet he fancied that, in spite of Mrs. Eversley's breakdown in the carriage, the interview had somehow dissipated the fears from which she had seemingly suffered. He concluded these fears were no clearer than any other points connected with their relations; unless she apprehended that the poet would tell the "odious" Baroness de Chanzy and others her "story," whatever it might be. As to her tears, they were half nerves, half tribute to a disappointed heart.

Harding had encountered Colston only once since that night, when he would have passed him rather coldly by, had not the other greeted him amiably and chatted away quite as though no reason existed for coolness. And indeed, Harding had none, beyond

chivalry towards Mrs. Eversley. Besides, he was in debt to the other for suggesting material for his new novel, which rather obliged him—(he remembered the next moment)—to pause at least long enough to say that he had definitely adopted the plot. The poet smiled rather strangely, he thought, but magnificently brushed aside Harding's expressions of indebtedness, to speak of his own affairs. It seemed that he and Fernet had had a definite break, and the cause lay not with Monica Eversley—the hope of gaining whom the sculptor had resigned, according to her mother—but with Buttercup Baxter. Harding had seen by the *Paris Herald* that she and her aunt were again at the Hotel de l'Athénée. It was about a bust of the young woman, Harding was informed, and the result of the rupture was that Colston had left his friend's apartment in the rue St. Honoré.

"You know I made Fernet, by posing for his 'Youth,' he continued, "and I once thought he had a future, but he's sadly fallen off. I got Buttercup to sit for him, for I'm always thinking of others. But when the bust was half done, I saw it would be a failure. So I took her to Circour, a pupil of Rodin, who I knew could touch off her American crudeness in a thoroughly effective way. Fernet said it was outrageous of me. I told him it wasn't half as outrageous as his bust of Buttercup. As he wouldn't apologise for his behaviour, I moved my things out next day. I refuse to be treated unjustly."

"And where are you living now?"

"Oh, with Circour, naturally," was the answer. "I told him, as he caused the break, he owed me a home. He's pretty hard up. But he has talent, and I'm already making him the fashion."

Harding asked whether Buttercup had begun singing the Saga of the States. But it appeared that Miss Zenobia had set her foot down. The poet had read her 'The Song of Adam,' and almost shocked her into apoplexy.

"She implied," continued Buttercup's saviour, "that there was too much grass about the 'Leaves,' and not enough fig. I was quite indignant with her. When she called Whitman 'indecent,' I told her there was nothing filthier than lucre, and if she could face an American dollar, she needn't faint at 'The Song of Adam.' She's really the most impossible woman I ever met."

It appeared, however, that he had taken up the Baxters all the same, which perhaps explained his neglect of Mrs. Eversley. Harding saw their names frequently in the paper as among those at various fashionable entertainments, proving that Percy Colston touted for Miss Baxter as diligently as he had for her predecessor in his favour. Harding called once or twice during the late autumn, but on finding them always out, he resigned them to his rival.

His increasing intimacy with the Eversleys had, indeed, something to do with the slighting of Buttercup and her aunt. Work on his book demanded most of

his hours, and what leisure he had, was pretty well taken up in "being good" to Mrs. Eversley at first; and in time he would, perhaps, have faltered in his benevolence, had not his visits to the house thrown him with her daughter. Monica had at first treated him coolly, having apparently repented of her half-capitulation in the Bois; and Harding felt that his intimacy with her mother counted against him. It was part of her general prejudice that took time to overcome. But he overcame it in great measure, as the weeks passed, by adapting his ideas to hers, by checking his tendency to utter flippant cynicisms. Pique entered, in a way, into his efforts to please her: her indifference towards him both attracted and challenged; and when he actually gained her friendship, he felt that it was a triumph over her natural antipathy.

Perhaps it would have been more difficult, had not his novel helped to win her favour. Its healthy, optimistic tone pleased her, as had his poems by their lack of bitterness and morbid self-analysis. The book had been going well, as a result of the publishers' abundant advertisement. It figured as one of "the best sellers," and the house had arranged with a playwright for its dramatisation—it was the moment when popular novels got on the boards—so that Harding could look forward sanguinely to some thousands of royalty at the beginning of the year. This had all inspired him for work; and he had another manuscript ready to float in the wake of his first

success. *The Labyrinth of Life*, as he called his new story, had almost seemed to write itself; and he had put the finishing touches to it the previous week. He had never done work so quickly and with so little agonising over the style.

He had given Monica Eversley the manuscript to read before sending it to the publisher—this showed where he had got in his relations with her. He knew she had grown to like him through liking *The Horns of the Altar*. After reading that first novel, she had told him he misrepresented himself in conversation. that he was not the discouraged, futile person he claimed to be. He deprecated her assumption that the optimistic tone of the story was his real self, his pessimism about life a pose; and, indeed, there had been many moments when, exhilarated by success newly come to him, he was half persuaded it had been a pose; but he saw that Monica Eversley did not believe in his efforts to be honest with her. And desire for honesty with her had grown in him, with the growth of their friendship, until he resolved—and he felt it one of the crises of his life—that he would make it an issue between them: she should accept him pessimist as he was, or not accept him at all. He knew that he had a fundamental distrust of the reasonableness and equity of things—a lack of faith in himself, and in his world—and he could not, would not pretend to any other opinion. Yet the loss of Monica Eversley's respect and liking would be a heavy price to pay for

this honesty with himself and with her. It was all part of his new intolerance towards compromise. *The Labyrinth of Life* was his protest against hypocrisy in literature, as his placing the manuscript in Monica Eversley's hands to read, was his protest in friendship—or rather love, for he knew that he had come to love her. Yet he had confidence that she would accept him still, even thus altered in her eyes. She was sincere, and would surely respect sincerity.

It was this reflection which sustained him as he thought of the story; for it was a sheer contradiction of the attitude towards life he had taken in *The Horns of the Altar*. It was a tale of two lovers held apart by a criminal shadow on the part of the woman's family. Her grandmother had committed a crime, and she had vowed herself to singleness rather than marry and transmit to her offspring the stain—perhaps the vicious tendencies—of ancestry. But, overcome in the end by her lover's pleading and by the prompting of her own heart, she marries. A child is born that demonstrates the force of hereditary influence, and fate brings tragic punishment to those who have broken the tables of duty on the Mount Sinai of Science's law.

He had effectively employed the element of Greek fatality in the story, and he prided himself on having written it without thought of popularity. In so much had the lofty counsels of Percy Colston prevailed. He hoped that Monica would, at all events, commend

the art of the book, however much she might disapprove of the argument; and, after all, she had boasted of her own ability to face unflinchingly the facts of existence; and he had faced them himself, artistically, boldly, allowing all that belonged to the situation in the story to claim the dues of ill heritage stalking down the blood of a family, generation after generation. He had laboured to echo the choral wail of old classic drama, remembering the despair of *Œdipus*, as Mounet Sully had made it vital to him, the violent solution of *Jocasta* to the tangle of horror in which fate had involved her.

CHAPTER XI

SNOW had fallen all Christmas day, its feathery flakes dropping through the air like notes of a delicate melody. But towards twilight it had ceased; and now as Harding issued from his room, overhead in the clear sky hung the bright moon.

Paris had never seemed to him so much an enchanted city as thus clothed in the silvery phantasy of snow, with the fabulous light of the moon filtering through the deep blue air. It called out a strange sort of passion in him, the sense of love that had so long lain unused in his heart. Harding had begun to feel the lack of a big stimulus in his life, and it no longer seemed enough that love should merely brush his manhood in an abstract way. He wanted it to dominate him, as the moon dominated the snowy night.

As he walked along the quay he played with new thoughts of Monica Eversley, the only woman who had come into his life with the appeal of a definite personality. His sentimental moments with Mrs. Eversley had meant nothing, though he had been moved to take her small white hand and say things to her he did not feel. Thinking of her daughter, he recalled some of his first rather pursuing fancies about her. One had been suggested by strolling through the Salon where he had come on one of

Maxence's canvas, representing a woman clasped in an ermine mantle, pensively straying by an Alpine glacier, in her hand green crystals of ice that were intended, no doubt, to symbolise a virginal heart and pure dreams. He had the feeling that Monica Eversley was like her, cold, unawakened to love, to the earthly side of life. He had been tempted to awaken her, he had succeeded in awakening himself.

Crossing the Pont de Solférino, he entered the Tuileries Gardens, meaning when he reached the rue de Rivoli to take a cab. He wanted to walk awhile and breathe deep into his lungs the crisp, tonic night. The snow-mantled solitude of the gardens was like consecrated ground. It was a world of dreams, a place pure with spiritual exaltation. Fallen snow masked the earth and heroic marble shapes of statuary; glittering icicles hung from the trees; it was all exquisite as a landscape of sleep—some white version of the spell-bound domains of Armida, with its glacial flowers, its shrouded trees, bright from the flooding moonbeams on the frosted sward. What had been familiar to him was transformed, wrought to symbols of chastity befitting mystic purlieus where dwelt the Dian-soul of winter. It was life untouched by taint of experience, untrampled by care, virgin-white as the untried.

He was dining at Neuilly, that night; only one other guest was invited, Miss Fitzgerald, who was stopping at the house. When he arrived, Mrs. Eversley thanked him for the roses he had sent. She anyway had

preserved the sentimentality of their earlier relations, if Harding had forgotten there ever had been sentimentality between them. . . . He never dignified it by sentiment. She was full of her old smiling assurance. Her "story" was seemingly still safe, and she went about a great deal again, not, it was true, in the most elect society, nor did so many of the artistic set Percy Colston had gathered about her come now to the house; Harding heard nothing about a "salon," nor were there any "Wednesday dinners"; yet if she suffered from this half eclipse of her former rôle as a patroness of art, she made shift to conceal her bitterness.

Harding was glad to meet Elsie Fitzgerald again. He had not seen her since Mrs. Eversley's dinner the previous spring, and he had pleasant recollections of her bright talkativeness at the garden party. She told him that she had been travelling with her father, and that his health had prevented her going on with her work under Marchesi. But she had taken it up again, and had, that winter, been studying opera rôles and hoped eventually to obtain a Paris engagement. Harding thought, with her clear Irish face and auburn hair, what an attractive Isolde she would make.

After some moments, Monica entered the room. Her stateliness was one of the things he admired in her. She was only of medium height, but her carriage gave the effect of greater stature. There was nothing of her mother's pretty fragility in her strong, young figure, that has just enough maturity to suit the serious

Madonna-like eyes. He could fancy her a Madonna of the modern school, holding against her breast a child, sober-eyed like herself. There was latent suggestion of a beautiful maternity in her, Harding thought, in spite of her cold manner. Her greyish eyes had the attraction of something deep, even brooding, but they were hard to-night, as she gave him her hand. Indeed, the formality of her greeting surprised him, prepared as he was for some possible manifestations of disapproval, born of reading his manuscript. It seemed to thrust him brusquely back to the period of their initial acquaintance. He had allowed for something of this, yet it did not save him from being disappointed.

It robbed him of the spirits with which he had come in from the snowy night, preoccupied him, in spite of himself, while at table, although he made an effort to meet Miss Fitzgerald's gaieties, display the proper amount of interest in Mrs. Eversley's affected little speeches. It was a relief when dinner was over, and they passed into the smoking-room. After a little, Mrs. Eversley carried off Elsie Fitzgerald on the plea that she wanted her to sing, leaving him and Monica alone. It was what he had hoped might happen. He wanted the opportunity to know how he stood with Monica, what underlay her altered manner.

He had taken his stand before the fireplace, while he stirred his coffee. The light from the wood fire on the hearth cast sharp flickerings on the objects of the room; the low bookcases, with their varied

surface of soberly bound volumes; the pieces of Rouen china, blue and white Moustir and Rodi, ranged along the edge of the high dado. The bright shadows, leaping here and there, fell on one of Miss Eversley's hands, as it lay on her lap, staining it red . . . the beautiful hand he had always admired. He recalled again, idly, how he had found a resemblance between it and the cast of the Marquise de Brinvillier's in Madame de Kansa's waiting-room. He could fancy the latter's reddened thus . . . the small, subtle hand so ingenious in dealing death, as old pages of criminal history related. On second thought, he rather wished he had never seen the plaster model.

She sat on a divan under a portrait of her mother painted by J. Blanche. It was a study in whites, and cleverly suggested the original's trivial, self-satisfied airs of *chic*. The contrast between Mrs. Eversley in paint and her daughter in person below, serious, with something half antagonistic in her attitude, made him freshly sensible of the difference between the two. It had demanded, he thought, a good deal of adaptability to win the favour of both, as he had succeeded in doing; at least, for a while, in the case of Miss Eversley. But he could see he was not in favour now. Her effort to be polite at table had passed with the disappearance of her mother and Elsie Fitzgerald. Displeasure—if it was that—sat rather well on her, he confessed. She was handsomer than usual. Her gown of green Liberty satin, of shifting shades and simply made, suited her dark hair and harmonized

with her eyes; not small and spiteful as such eyes often were, but with a suggestion of chill in the depths; they were like sea water under northern skies.

She left it to him to begin the conversation. Constraint due to her manner made him silent awhile, during which Miss Fitzgerald's voice, wafted from the salon, came to their ears. She was singing Senta's ballad from the *Flying Dutchman*.

"How well Miss Fitzgerald sings," he remarked finally.

"Yes; her voice has gained a great deal this last year, though she has had to neglect it," Miss Eversley answered. "Elsie is glad to be back in Paris, and quite triumphant over having finally got her family to see she was meant to be a singer. It is a pleasure to have her here again."

"I should think it would be . . . she is a charming girl."

They were silent once more, and then, after a moment or so, Monica rising, went to her escritoire and taking from a drawer Harding's manuscript, handed it to him, saying:

"Here is your story, Mr. Harding. I have finished it."

He took it, wounded by the casual way in which she returned it.

"I see," he said, "it hasn't pleased you. I'm sorry, for I wanted it to, and I value your judgment. I wish you'd tell me frankly how it strikes you."

"I'd much rather not discuss it."

"Really, I don't see why," he said, perplexed, "and I had quite counted on you."

She regarded him haughtily for an instant, as though his assurance surprised her. He had the odd impression that she assumed some hidden design on his part in giving her the manuscript. It confused him a little, he did not know why; for he had no reason for self-consciousness about it, outside of the feelings he bore her.

"You can't imagine it would be otherwise than distasteful to me," she returned. "Unless . . ."

She checked the hasty tone in which she had begun. But it was a reluctant half concession.

He flushed at her ungraciousness. "Of course," he said stiffly, "I shan't insist. But I confess I am at a loss to account for your feeling that way. You expressed interest in the story, you remember, and seemed willing enough to read it."

"You didn't tell me what it was about."

"I know I didn't, I thought it better you should get your impressions from the plot properly clothed. Besides, I haven't much skill at describing in brief. Did it strike you as so disagreeable, then?"

"What, did you think, Mr. Harding, that it *could* be agreeable?"

Her eyes were bright as she faced him, one hand resting on the back of a chair. Her whole attitude was so unexpected and inexplicable that he hardly knew what to say.

"I thought, at all events, that it might interest

you," he ventured. "That seemed the main thing. About its being disagreeable or not . . . I don't know I put it that way to myself. It isn't a question one especially considers, unless a story deals with things outside the pales of what is ordinarily discussable between people. And there isn't any such element in mine. At least, I can't see it."

Her face changed a little under his hesitant perplexity; it was obvious that he was sincere.

"Really," he went on, "your attitude rather mystifies me. I don't mean your not liking the story, but your way of taking it. I thought we were friends—friends in the sense you'd care to talk about my work with me. Naturally, I expected frankness. You can hit as hard as you want, you know. It isn't that, but your wanting to say nothing, to refuse me the benefit of criticism. Even if it doesn't interest you. . . ."

"I haven't said it doesn't interest me," she interrupted, more herself. "Painful, disagreeable things often do that. It's because I feel strongly about the story, too strongly perhaps, that I don't care to discuss it. Yet, after all, it may be better . . . since you don't see—may misinterpret,"—and her voice quickened to pride again—"my reasons. I'd like to ask you, though, first, how you happened to choose this particular theme. I remember you once told me you cared nothing for scientific theses, that they didn't 'appeal to your temperament' was, I think, your phrase. Naturally, I was rather surprised to find the story what it is."

"It's true, I never have much interested myself

in such things; and it was the dramatic rather than the problematic element of heredity that tempted me. I wanted to see if I couldn't make a scientific thesis a bit less dreary artistically than most novelists do. It wouldn't have occurred to me, though, I confess, if I hadn't had a talk with Percy Colston last summer. He, really, gave me the idea of the plot."

Her face, that had yielded a little, grew cold again. "Ah, then it *was* deliberate!"

She stopped at his puzzled look, and half turned from him, as if to conceal emotion.

Afterwards, he wondered why he had not better understood; but he merely thought her displeased at his putting himself under obligations to a man who had abused her mother's confidence, and been the cause of so much mortification to herself.

"I'm sorry if you think it was in bad taste," he stammered. "I shouldn't have done it now, under the circumstances of our friendship, for I know you dislike him, or rather don't respect him—I don't suppose you'd trouble to dislike him—but I hadn't decided on any plot for a new book, and he said it was an idea which had come into his head, that he never wrote stories; and after he suggested it, it took such hold of me I felt as though I *had* to write it."

She had turned towards him as he spoke, and if there was still a trace of emotion in her face, relief was there, as if he had reinstated himself in her opinion, to some degree, by his defence.

"Perhaps I have misjudged you," she said, after

a moment. "That was not what I meant. It is not my place to criticize you for taking advantage of Mr. Colston's . . . ideas. It's not your taking them, it's the spirit in which you use them. Have you no scruples in treating a scientific theory . . . for the sake of mere dramatic suggestion?"

Somehow, for all his resolve to be honest with her, he hesitated over confessing that, in reading up for his story, he had been won to believe—or half believe—his heredity thesis; and he said instead:

"It's a plausible theory, anyway."

"And is it being 'plausible' enough? Have you thought of the public effect of such a story as *The Labyrinth of Life*? You must realise what harm it can do."

Under her reproach, the tone of her voice, which had the vibrating quality of suppressed feeling, he experienced tenderness for her mixed with something of a schoolboy's sense of guilt under his master's eye. How could he disillusion her, as he had planned that night, by telling her that the hard-won faith she had in his character, as, apparently, it revealed itself in his first book she liked, was misplaced, that the manuscript he now held was more than a story . . . it was his true self? Her fingers still touched the chair-back near her, and as his glance fell on their tapered whiteness, he wondered what their caress was like. Her hands seemed destined only to hurl thunderbolts of condemnation at him. As they stood there, before the fire, regarding each other, she seemed to him a

dark-browed young spirit guarding the sacred rights of life he trampled in artistic wantonness.

"I speak strongly," she continued, after a pause, which seemed offered him as means to justify himself, "Because I can't understand how a man like you can write like that. I thought you had more conscience than to try to persuade people that hereditary instincts are uncombatable, that people are powerless against the taint of blood, the weaknesses handed down to them. You ask me what I think of the story, so conceived, flippantly, without pity or heart. What do you *suppose* I think? can help thinking—of it . . . or of you?"

She was severe with him, certainly, he said to himself, and he fancied she would be more so, if she knew the truth. His impulse to be honest died within him as he thought it was of no use. . . . He would lose her through sincerity, as he had half lost her already.

"But what difference does it make whether I, Julian Harding, personally believe or not a theory if that theory has the endorsement of great scientists?" he temporized lamely.

"But scientific works don't generally fall into the hands of emotional, unthinking people," she returned. "And you have deliberately aimed, it seems, to make it all as bad as possible, for the sake of a 'dramatic' ending, I suppose. And has even science the right to preach non-resistance? Why should one live at all, if one can't conquer things in oneself, if one *has* to succumb under an ancestral weight?"

"Yet if some fall, others rise, on the evolutionary principle, you know. If it weren't for that, it would be all pretty hopeless," he ventured, adding mentally, "as it all really is."

"But I won't believe there isn't a chance for everybody to rise," she exclaimed with feeling. "That's what I used so to dislike in you, the feeling you pretended to have about life. I *know* there is the principle of right in the world, and there would be none if the weak had no resort. A scientist who snatches away that hope from people, commits a sin. It disappoints me, that you should write such a book . . . after your other book showed you in such a different and helping light."

He was silent, hesitating under an impulse. He knew that she verged on that reactionary moment which comes after condemnation has been taken humbly, as he had taken hers. Having been so harsh, it would not be difficult for her to be kind. He was tempted to tell her that she was right in thinking he did himself injustice, that he had been led astray by an artistic whim to misrepresent himself, that he did not believe in heredity, that he was the more hopeful teacher of his first book, not the bitter discouraged philosopher of the pages she had so lately turned with displeasure. But self-respect led him to confide to her only the conclusion he reached.

"Well, you have convinced me of the mistake. I hate disappointing you. . . ." He saw she faltered a little under his look. "I'll not publish the story. I

promise you that, if only it will help to redeem me in your opinion."

Faint colour touched her cheek. He had once before seen it there, the day he had talked with her in the Bois. It encouraged him, as some proof that her severity sprang from regard for him. Something about her made him feel she perhaps cared more than she wished to show.

Having spoken, he made a little gesture, as though to pitch the manuscript into the fire.

"No!" she cried, putting her hand arrestingly on his arm. Alarmed protest was in her voice.

He hardly knew whether he really had intended to cast it in the hearth where the flaming logs burned brightly, like licking tongues hungry for food. It was at least a genuine half-impulse; for he was stirred by the sense of her love subtly responding to his own. He was sensitive, too, to condemnation of his work, and her words had left him robbed of pride in his story.

Yet the touch of her hand on his arm almost seemed to compensate.

"You don't want me to destroy it, then?" he asked, thinking how capricious her sex was.

"No, not like that—as though you were doing it to please me. It is too much a sacrifice to another's opinion. If you destroy it, do it for your own sake. Otherwise you will regret it."

"But you've convinced me I ought to. That it's the only thing to do," he returned. "Your good

opinion matters more than a book more or less . . . though a half-year's thrown away." He couldn't help adding this, that she might appreciate the sacrifice. "You told me, not long ago," he went on, "that I seemed changed since you first knew me. If I am, you must know why. You remember that day in the Bois I told you I felt you were going to be an influence on my life. You didn't believe me—I don't know I altogether believed myself. It was only instinct. You drew me then, had been drawing me from the first, though I didn't guess what our wrangles meant really, how surface antagonism was attraction at heart. And, well . . . you must see what it's grown to be with me."

"I haven't wanted to see."

She did not say it falteringly, but she had turned a little from him. It seemed a favourable sign that she did not face his love-making as courageously as she had their previous issues.

"Your friendship is all I've cared for."

"And you *have* cared about that, then? Do you think if only you had a little more confidence in me that you'd care—otherwise—too? I'm not sure," he went on boldly, "you don't already. I can't help feeling that you do . . . a little."

It was unwise; the colour again came to her cheek. It was the stain of indignation, as though he had looked rudely into her bosom.

"But you have no right to," she responded quickly. "I've given you no cause. Surely one may step a

little out of one's reserve, be a friend to a man, without such inference. I trusted, somehow, you understood that . . . that I hate the thought of love," she ended almost fiercely. She looked at him now, as though she challenged him to find in her face any sign of it there.

"Hate it . . . and why?" he asked. "You don't mean that. "You can't mean it. It's nonsense. Why should you not care for what all women care for . . . to love and be loved. And I need you, Monica. You must see that, what a help you'd be in the life of a man like me, who hasn't any particular standards. It's what you've done for me that is almost like a claim to what you can still do. You've started me in the right direction. Surely, you ought to want to keep me there."

"But I can't keep you there," she exclaimed, as though struggling against the appeal that affected her most. "Nobody can, but yourself. I've given you my confidence in the character you malign. If that can't help . . . nothing can."

He tried to take her hand. In his thoughts he often named her "Monica of the White Hand." "It's not your ethics, you know," he said with a conciliatory tenderness, "it's you that counts. Think, Monica, what you *could* call out in me."

"Don't ask me to make your life for you, Mr. Harding," and hearing her use the formal word, he wondered if she was resisting him or herself. "It doesn't lie with others . . . you know it. You think I matter, for the moment. But I don't. And besides"—he was

touched by the dignity in her face, which she assumed, he thought, from a realization that she appeared to be leading him on—"it's all useless. I never intend to marry. Nobody, nothing would induce me to."

"I'm afraid," he said, with a smile that wasn't a particularly brilliant effort, "that if men took the word of every woman who said that, there wouldn't be many marriages on earth . . . however many there may be in heaven."

"You may believe me."

"Yes, as regards myself, no doubt," he answered a little sarcastically, for while he hadn't given up hope, something told him his suit was destined to come to naught. "But how about others. Suppose the right man comes . . . and, evidently, I'm not he."

She seemed to appreciate his pique and to wish to soothe it. After all, she was more womanly than she appeared. "I've told you that it has nothing to do with you . . . with anybody."

"But your reasons! Give me some fair plea for such a feeling!" He hoped, because he wished to hope, that he could make short work of them.

"My reasons concern myself," she answered; "and I'd much rather you wouldn't speak any more of this. In any case,"—she hesitated, a little, over it—"I should never marry you, Mr. Harding. I don't mean it unkindly . . . but only to make you see I'm serious, so you may dismiss the thought of me while it is, perhaps, only an impulse. I mean," and she seemed to wish that she might make herself quite clear, "that

whether I cared for you or not, it would be out of the question. If you don't see why, some day you may."

He flushed, sensitively. "I confess, I don't," he answered. "Unless the fault lies with my character."

"Your character has nothing to do with it," she said gently. "There is a great deal in you that I like, though you are always misrepresenting yourself. But you have shown me what are your views about certain things, and they make my refusal inevitable. I say that really to spare your feelings, not to hurt them; and to prove to you that you mustn't ever speak to me in this way again." Her voice had dropped almost into pleading.

He did not, however, stop to consider what she meant, though vaguely he supposed she referred to the heresies of his manuscript, which, it seemed to him, she could now afford to forget. Surely, by his promise to destroy the story, the poor ghost of his "mistake" in writing the book needn't hang about them, dispensing its death-damps. In fact, though he didn't argue it out with himself, it gave him a feeling that after all she was "serious" to the extent that made her half the intellectual prude Percy Colston accused her of being. He almost resented his vain sacrifice, and he replied, in his impulse of chagrin:

"Then I suppose it is rather stupid to speak of 'friendship' either. When one leaves it for something more, it's absurd to suppose one ever goes back to it. One doesn't."

"I'm sorry you ever left it then, Mr. Harding." He

saw that his air of finality about their relations grieved her; her eyes showed some pain, and the proud antagonistic woman who had treated him to a lecture on the duties of authors to the public had subsided, leaving her oddly young, faltering in spite of herself, and certainly a woman that a man would like to kiss. It was not the grand Miss Eversley who swept by in regal skirts to crown the detested Percy Colston for winning a mediæval golden eglantine. It was a girl who regretted that a man who had become her friend was breaking with her under the delusion that love could make either of them happy.

He softened under it, piqued as he was; though he put out his hand formally. He really hoped by this mark of farewell that she would, with the unexpectedness of woman—which, after all a man expects—treat with him ere the parting was final. But she did not waver, so he said:

“ Monica, *why* must it be your answer? I believe you do care for me, though you won’t say so. Isn’t there anything that will change you? ”

“ No, nothing,” she answered briefly, though it was not, in its tone, a hard answer.

“ Very well, then,” he replied. And with the memory of the picture she made, standing, with saddened eyes, by the fire, he left her.

CHAPTER XII

HARDING stood moodily at his window, watching the watery light of a dull February afternoon fade from the sky-line above the long black silhouette of the Palais de Justice.

He was heartily tired of Paris, tired of its vulgar winter weather that dampened his spirits, tired of the futile life he had led the last two months. Literary success had come to him, and he was taking it no better than his former failures. Indeed, he sometimes wondered if success wasn't the worst failure of all. In a way, he would have liked to think—sometimes did think—that Monica Eversley's rejection of him was the cause of his discontent with himself and the world. But that feeling was only the surface conviction of moments. His gloomy humour, in analysing himself, could not credit the despairing lover; and he asked himself if his grievance wasn't less a blighted heart than wounded vanity—pique at not succeeding any better than Nicolls and Fernet. Whatever the reason, the thought of Monica Eversley continued to dominate him—the more desirable, perhaps, because unattainable. Often he criticized her resentfully, ridiculed his folly in proposing to her; and with it was the regret that he had forfeited self-respect in adopting such a tone with her, that Christmas night. It had been in the hope

of winning her; and having failed, he would like to be able to reflect that, at least, he had been honest with her, stood, so to say, by his philosophic guns. He had not seen her since, although he had left cards at the house several times when he knew that both she and her mother would be out; for he preferred that Mrs. Eversley should not suspect his relations with her daughter were broken off. He supposed she would eventually find a new shoulder to lean on. Percy Colston alleged that she was given to discussing her daughter's little love affairs; Harding did not want to be quoted as the last chapter. There were times when he would have liked to fall back on the old friendly footing with Monica, for he did not believe that many men took rejections as tragically as they protested. But he had committed himself to an attitude, and pride, if not sentiment, held him to it. And it had, at least, the virtue of dignity. He did not want Monica to think, any more than he wished to think himself, that his feelings for her were trivial.

He had not taken up any new literary work. There was, as yet, no particular need of having another book ready, for *The Horns of the Altar* was still selling well. His royalties, the first of the year, had been gratifyingly large; and in the flush of easier circumstances he had—unaccustomed to a full pocket—let himself go a good deal, in taking the pleasures Paris afforded. Reaction from late nights had added to his bad spirits, for he was not strong, and he had inherited a touch of neurasthenia from his father, a man of irritable nerves

and disposed to melancholy like himself. It had only been by exercising care over his health that he had borne the strain of New York life; his constitution had never quite recovered from the physical breakdown of his first youth.

It was with a feeling of boredom that he turned from the dreary prospects outside, and picked up a volume lying on the table. It was De Musset's *Poésies Nouvelles*, which had lately come from the binder's—a picturesque old shop behind St. Eustache that he had unearthed in roaming about Paris. Glancing over its pages he came on the tale of Rolla—thinly disguised figure of De Musset himself—who, seeker after the life of the heart, preferred the prodigal brief career to a long one of ennui and prudence. Why not, Harding mused, follow that hero's example?

*Il prit trois bourses d'or, et durant trois années,
Il vécut au soleil sans se douter des lois.*

He had his little capital—his “three purses”—and it would allow him to wander where he would, far from cities, civilization, for which, he thought dispiritedly, he was temperamentally unfit. What had he ever got out of it really?

He had travelled so little. The one momentous experience had been his half-year in South America. Nothing he had seen since had approached those early vivid impressions: the sun-steeped landscapes, the billowy green savannahs; the palm forests lifting royal crowns; the flight of parakeets across the twilight-reddened heavens, the enchanted nights of flooding

moonlight so bright it awoke the hubbub of birds mistaking it for dawn. He remembered how the odour of jasmine had filled his bedroom where, through the open door, bats and huge moths entered, beating against the netting of his couch like evil dreams. Why had he left such freedom for the tiresome, grinding life of cities, for the mockery of art ambition? How little did literary success mean to him. He was tired of it already. He wondered if many writers cared as much for their profession as they pretended. He had encountered no few who confessed to its weary strain, who doubtless would have been glad to escape if they could from such a life of mean rewards.

It was long after his usual hour for dining; and he left his lodgings, turning his steps towards the bright Boulevards, its throngs and *brasseries*, with their music and bustle. He was sick of that cheap side of Paris life, but it was better than brooding in his room.

He had got as far as the Place Royale before he realized it was *Mardi Gras*. Traffic had been suspended in the main down-town avenues, so that out-door celebration of the death of Carnival might be pursued without bar. The Boulevards were already thick underfoot with confetti, and the crowd was keyed up to mad merriment. Camelots vended, in shrill voice, bags of parti-coloured missiles and masks; and the brimming stream of pedestrians, some in domino and fancy dress, were engaged in animated warfare. Harding was facetiously greeted, as he made his way along, from time to time receiving a fusillade of confetti in full face.

But he was in no mood to respond, and it all struck him morosely, as some Dance of Death that mocked at his loneliness and depression. He almost regretted that he had come abroad.

A fine rain began to fall, and the Boulevards were quickly deserted for various refuges. Harding found himself near a restaurant, and entered it, at random, to get his belated dinner.

The drizzle was over when he came out; and a chill wind blew in the street. Turning up his coat collar, he strolled as far as the Place de l'Opéra, where he paused, debating whether or not he should go back to his room.

The Opéra was ablaze with light, announcing one of its periodical masked balls. Harding had never attended any of these, and he yielded to curiosity to see a spectacle that had lost much of its old prestige for abandoned mummery. Buying a ticket at the bureau, with its row of black-garbed officials, looking like judges convened to pass sentence on human folly, he mounted the great marble staircase to the couloirs giving on the parquet, cleared of seats to accommodate the dancers. It was after midnight, and the rout was getting into full swing. Newcomers like himself were pouring in, the majority in evening dress, some in domino. The music sent deafening ripples over the ebullition of human voices. Wedging his way through the crowd Harding found a place whence he secured a general view of the house.

The battle that earlier had animated the Boulevards, was being waged here with greater verve; coloured

paper discs rained through the air and lay in heaps underfoot; shooting stars, trailing long ribbons, shot from the boxes and gave the pit the appearance of a huge, glittering spider web, among the meshes of which the dancers struggled like bright-winged insects. Quadrilles were in progress and Harding gazed at the phantasy of costume that picked out in warm hues the black, shifting mass. There were the usual parti-coloured figures in tights, the Pierrots and Columbines, mignons of Henri II, that flirted with Watteau shepherdesses and goddesses of liberty; musketeers in false noses, that capered with the sorceresses and *vivandières*, ogling caricatured notabilities of the day. Mixed with these were the conventionally dominoed contingent, dancers in ordinary dress, foreign adventurers, *vieux marcheurs*, provincial sports arm in arm with farded mistresses . . . a veritable Masque of Comus, where gaiety expressed itself in high kicking, shrill jest, and breathless laughter.

When the quadrille was over, Harding joined the others circulating about the floor. He strayed idly, glancing up at the boxes occupied by *demi-mondaines*, rich shopkeepers, foreigners, and others who preferred to be mere spectators.

As he passed one of the boxes, he received in his face a fusillade of confetti. It was followed by a high-keyed laugh that seemed familiar. When he had sufficiently cleared his vision, he beheld Percy Colston leaning towards the pit and signalling. Behind him were two women in masks and black silk dominoes.

"Come up and join us," the poet hailed. "The Baxters are with me, studying half-world, fleshings and would-be devilry. We watched you straying about and couldn't make up our minds whether you've attended the ball as a Watts' Hymn or as Alaster, Weary of his Solitude."

His companions seconded the invitation by beckonings, and rather reluctantly, Harding made his way into the box.

"Well now," remarked Miss Zenobia, as she shook hands, "isn't this real nice! We were talking of you only yesterday and wondering if you'd clean forgotten us? I don't know as I'd a let you find me at such a gay place as this, if it wasn't you're a stranger, these days. I haven't congratulated you yet about your book. Many happy returns of the day! Why, they say it's been selling like hot cakes in America, so I guess you're quite set up!"

Buttercup, who had taken off her mask to fan herself with it, made a grimace at her aunt's homely similitude. Harding had the feeling that she fancied herself evolved beyond such phraseology. She was less florid in looks and was already fulfilling her promise of being handsomer. Had the poet then not succeeded in keeping her crude?

"Yes," she supplemented, "he's quite dropped old friends. But we all know why." And she smiled significantly, with reproach in her eyes.

"Yes, Buttercup and I have bet as to who is to get the apple out at Neuilly," the poet contributed languidly.

"I say it's the mother, and she holds it's the daughter. Which is it—Venus or Minerva? I wish you'd tell us, for we're both dying to know."

"Leave him alone, Percy!" said Buttercup gaily. "I didn't have him come up here to be made sport of. He's going to give me a dance, aren't you, Mr Harding? Percy says it isn't *comme il faut*, but I don't care whether it is or not. I'm crazy for a waltz. There, that's the 'Valse Bleue' now . . . it's such a dream! Here, Percy, put on my mask, if you're afraid your friends will see you."

"There are none of them here, I assure you," the poet returned, affecting to stifle a yawn. "Nobody comes to the Opéra ball any more. It went out of fashion years ago. The managers have to hire male supers to try to give it life. As you see, it's dying of low-class respectability. It took our grandmothers to give it spice."

"I know the kind *my* grandmother would give it," Miss Zenobia commented. "And that's cayenne. She had plenty on her tongue, I can tell you, when she didn't take to other folk's doings. But all the same, go dance with Mr. Harding, Buttercup, if you want to. Now we're in Paris, you might as well take in everything going. Percy here forgets girls will be girls. . . ."

"When they won't be boys," the poet finished, pointing out a fluffy-headed nymph that skipped by dressed *en garçon*. "You'd better take a turn your-

self, Miss Zenobia. It will save you the expense of going back to Marienbad this summer."

"Don't you be pert!" replied that lady, with a flush of ire. "I'd rather see a tom-boy than a Miss Nancy, any day."

Buttercup laughed, as she and Harding left the box. "Aunt Zenobia is a match for Percy," she said, carelessly. "They're always at it. But you look as if you had the blues," she added, pausing to regard him. "Perhaps you don't feel up to a waltz?"

"On the contrary, I think it will be great sport," he returned, summoning a mood more suited to her gaiety. "Especially with you," he supplemented as an after-thought.

She had put on her mask again, so he did not see the slight increase of her hardy bloom, as she answered: "You're improving. You didn't use to be much at compliments. Has Mrs. Eversley been taking you in hand?"

"Suppose we drop the Eversley subject," he said, rather stiffly. "This is the way to the floor, I believe."

Buttercup danced well, and Harding, taking fire from her excited relish, enjoyed the rather jostled waltz. A looping tress of his partner's hair, blown from the rich mass crowning her head, kept tantalizingly brushing his cheek, as he guided her round the floor. The contact with her healthy, vibrant youth stirred his pulse, and he was strongly tempted to kiss her

under cover of the general revelry. But before he could put the impulse into effect, the music stopped with a crashing chord. Buttercup broke in to one of her ready laughs as they turned towards the corridor.

"Well, this *is* old times," she said gaily. "You remember the night of the Captain's dinner, on board the *Königen Luise*, how we danced together all evening . . . They joked us about being 'engaged.' Let's find the buffet and see if there's such a thing in Paris as a glass of water. *Isn't* it warm."

They discovered the refreshment bar. Harding got his companion a glass of iced champagne, and then they sought seats. Buttercup, as she assuaged her thirst, continued to talk animatedly of their golden yesterdays. Her air seemed to anticipate confident to-morrows together, as outcome of this pleasant evening's intimacy.

She hadn't changed much, after all, he thought, under Percy Colston's tutelage. The more sophisticated manner with which she had greeted him, seemed to slip away as she chatted on with the old spontaneity. There was something decidedly attractive about her. If they had married, there would have been, of course, mental variance, but there would, also, have been healthy everyday enthusiasms on her side, that, perhaps, would have won him from his pessimist glooms more effectively than Monica Eversley's insistent moral standards. And florid, crude, over-accentuated as she was still, she didn't lack intelligence and adaptability,

and time would tone her down to pass muster in the social world. She was the kind of girl that even the critical would learn to take by mere force of the way in which she took herself. If he had asked her to marry him, the night he had dined at the Athénée, would it have been the mistake he thought?

"Do you know," she was saying, "I've often wished you'd gone on that motor trip with us."

"Yes, I'm sorry I didn't," he said. "But I couldn't manage it."

The admission, or, perhaps, the shade of regret in his voice as he said it, seemed to fan the remembered rancour to something like a flame.

"It was horrid of you not to," she said. "And you've been horrid ever since. Were you put out because I asked Percy Colston instead? I don't believe you like him much. He says you've dropped him."

"I never particularly took him up," Harding answered. "And it's a case, I should say, of his dropping me. Of course, I wasn't put out by your asking him. Why should I have been? And as for acting 'horridly,' I'm sure I haven't meant to."

"I don't know what you call it, then," she returned, giving him a sentimental glance. "But, then, I never have known what you meant by anything. Poets aren't like other people."

"Don't, please, call me that," he said. "I leave poetry to Percy Colston."

"You leave a good deal to him, it seems to me," she returned significantly.

"Do I?" His momentary feeling about her had passed away, and the conversation began to bore him. Harding preferred to do his own courting.

At the unenthusiastic response, a piqued flush mounted to her cheek, half concealed by her mask. He saw just enough of the flush to know there was more.

"You needn't have been so snappy about the Eversleys," she said with abrupt irrelevance. His stiffness when they left the box had evidently been marked, though she resented it so tardily. "I didn't say anything against them, did I?"

"No; but I didn't like what Percy Colston said."

She laughed unpleasantly.

"I should think they'd be accustomed to being discussed by this time," she said. "At least, there was enough talk about the grandmother to last for several generations. So I hardly wonder you are touchy. Aunt remembers all about the famous Perdoe trial, only she'd forgotten the name of the Englishman the Perdoe woman's daughter married. I think I'd better go back to the box now. . . . They'll be wondering what's become of me." She got up, then hesitated, aware of the alienating effect of her speech. "I shouldn't have told you," she said in awkward half-apology, "if you hadn't made me mad, praising them so."

He did not reply, and perhaps from his air she guessed the truth; that something more than friendship towards the Eversleys—towards the daughter, at least—had made him difficult over her criticism in the box. The realization may have stung her heart, at any rate

it disposed of her repentance. She regarded him, facing her, stiffly displeased, thinking how ill-natured she was, understanding her too well, it might be; and she added, in a forcedly careless voice:

"I had to get it out of my system. After all, it was only paying you back for the way you talked of Percy Colston. I am engaged to him, you know."

Somehow he got the impression that the statement anticipated fact. Her manner suggested she had come to the decision while she stood there. She was not engaged to him, but she had made up her mind to be.

He had recovered himself. "Indeed?" he returned. "I offer you my heartiest congratulations, Miss Baxter. No doubt, if you have Percy Colston in your system, that explains your wanting to get a good many things out of it. There's a limit to what one system can bear." And he bowed sarcastically.

She stared with startled eyes of offence, then rather tempestuously turned towards the box. Harding followed her in silence as far as the door, reflecting he had been inexcusably rude.

On reaching home, he found a note that had arrived by the late post. It was from Miss Vanderhurst. "I'm in Paris for a few days on my way to Rome," she wrote. "Come to my hotel to-morrow at four, and we'll go to Colombin's for tea."

CHAPTER XIII

HARDING hailed Miss Vanderhurst's timely reappearance in Paris. It seemed quite providential she should turn up just then; for, of course, she could, and would, no doubt, tell him what he wanted to know. He would talk quite frankly to her about the Eversleys, and what Buttercup affirmed. Buttercup, he said to himself, had inherited some of the cayenne that Miss Zenobia attributed to her grandmother's tongue. He rather wondered at that lady's apparent knowledge of such an ancestor; but, if she wasn't mythical, it only went to prove that groceries had been in the family some generations.

"So you've become famous since I saw you," was Miss Vanderhurst's greeting, when he called on her next day. "I knew you'd wake up to it, sooner or later. I was charmed with *The Horns of the Altar*, as I wrote you. But," inspecting him, "you're not looking well."

"I can't say the same of you," he returned gallantly. "I don't know when I've seen you more blooming."

"Well, if I'm blooming, it must be century-plant bloom," was her dry reply, blooming still more at the compliment. "But tell me, what's wrong with you? Is it that troublesome temperament still? Or have

you been over-working; for I suppose the publishers are demanding more stories of you."

"No; I haven't been writing anything. I've been trying to amuse myself, and I find it overworks one far more than novels."

"So that's how you take your good fortune," she chided. "I'm ashamed of you. Don't get bored. Life ought never to bore."

"It's not life that bores me. It's myself."

"Then don't have any self. Exist for other people. I thought that now you'd be existing for Miss Buttercup Baxter. In anticipation of it I've religiously drunk nothing but 'Surpassing Ceylon' since I saw you. Don't tell me you've quarrelled with your heiress."

"She never was my heiress. She's Percy Colston's heiress now, as it happens. At least, for the time being. She's just announced her engagement to him."

"It's a broken heart, then? I hope you've saved the pieces. There's always some one ready, you know, to mend that interesting organ when the owner's young and celebrated. I shall have to cheer you up, I see. What shall we do for the few days I'm here? I think I'd like to go to the Louvre. It's years since I've seen the 'Flying Victory' and the 'Virgin of the Rocks.' We'll lunch on duck at the Tour d'Argent, go to one of those queer students' balls, do all the things people do when they first come to Paris. We'll drink Lipton's tea instead of Surpassing Ceylon . . . and forget the Baxters."

"I never particularly remembered them," he said

insincerely. "My interest in them existed mostly in your imagination. It's the old complaint, if anything's wrong. You know I always held that I had no talent for life."

"My dear boy," she remonstrated, giving his hand a pat, "don't be so in love with your Byronic gloom. It's gone out of fashion with soft collars and loose ties that were the most picturesque part of it. Nothing is wrong with yourself or the world. When something does go wrong with you, you'll recognise the need of being happy. I resolved long ago I *would* be happy . . . and I *have* been, as the result. It's mostly a matter of resolve. I wish you would follow my example. The Eversleys," she said, with the discretion of one who knows when to change a topic, "tell me they see little of you now. Lena's so fond of you, Mr. Harding. She says you've been quite lovely to her, as I knew you'd be."

"She's been lovely to me."

"Poor Lena! Did you know she met with a motor accident, the other day? She had quite a shock from the collision, and the doctor has kept her in a darkened room ever since. He fears trouble for her eyes."

"I'm sorry. . . . No, I hadn't heard."

He was silent, hesitating how to begin.

"There's something you can do for me, Miss Vanderhurst, if you will," he said soberly.

"You know, I'll be only too glad."

"Well, it's in regard to Monica Eversley, then.

And I'd better begin by telling you I proposed to her and she wouldn't have me."

"Then the trouble *is* specific, after all? I'm sorry, Mr. Harding." She was still a moment, considering him. "In a way I'm surprised that Monica has so appealed to you. You're sure she really does?"

"When I tell you I proposed to her?" he said, in rather injured tones. "I admit we weren't very sympathetic at first. In fact, we began by half disliking each other. I conquered her antipathy finally . . . and thought I'd conquered her. It all came about, I suppose, from the feeling of some common need, though she won't concede she has any need of me."

"As to proposing to her, Mr. Harding," Miss Vanderhurst returned a bit dryly, "I don't know that that proves anything. I've seen a good deal of men, and it seems to me they reach stages when they're apt to propose to women at random. You say you think Monica 'needs you.' Now, I have my doubts. I question if she has need of anybody. She is very independent and self reliant. I've often been struck with that, and, in a way, it rather offends my old-fashioned notions of women being the weaker vessel. You know I'm not the new sort of woman . . . I've lived too long to try to be new in anything. And Monica appears to me very distinctly to belong to the period that produced her."

"I know she seems all you say," he agreed. "Yet have you ever thought that it may all be the surface,

merely a shield? I've always been struck with something unnatural in her attitude towards people, as though she were governed by some warped idea about herself. She professes she doesn't want to marry. And I don't think it comes from a sense of superiority—the new woman kind of stand towards men—but as if she recognised some bar to marrying. Do you know any reason why she should feel so?"

The question showed that he had been thinking a good many things out for himself.

"Be more explicit, Mr. Harding, and then I can answer you, perhaps," Miss Vanderhurst returned, non-committally.

"Well, then," he said, "I'll put it this way. Is there any shadow on her family, any blot on the Eversley escutcheon, so to speak, something of that sort, to account for her morbidity—I can't help thinking it that—about not marrying."

"You've heard gossip about them?"

"Yes, I have," he acknowledged frankly, "and I want you to tell me what you know. The truth about it. That is, if you don't mind."

Miss Vanderhurst moved her wrinkled, white hands impatiently. "I'm sorry, Mr. Harding," she said. "It's such a pity to rake up what's past and over. Besides, the Eversleys are dear friends of mine. Yet, since the old scandal appears to have cropped up and you tell me how you feel towards Monica, it's best, I suppose, you should know."

"Then, it's true that Miss Eversley's grandmother . . ."

"Yes, she was Mrs. Perdoe. You remember the case, I fancy. I don't suppose a more sensational criminal trial ever stirred New York society . . . when New York *had* society. It happened about thirty years ago, before we'd become callous about such things. I must say it was very hard on Lena. She was a beautiful girl—you can imagine what she must have been from what she still is—and was just about to come out. Of course, it finished all that. Mrs. Perdoe enjoyed the privileges of the best old Knickerbocker circles, and was a brilliant, worldly woman. A marriage had been arranged between Lena and a young man of prominent family, and the match was broken off, naturally. It was a good deal later that she met Colonel Eversley of England. He fell in love with her at first sight, and on his death—a year after the marriage—Lena came abroad with her baby. At first she lived in rather out-of-the-way places, for the scandal followed her, as scandals will; but, at last, getting tired of roaming, she settled here in Paris."

Harding, a little impatient over Miss Vanderhurst's rambling way of telling the story, interrupted her to ask:

"And do you think Miss Eversley knows about her grandmother?"

"I've always assumed she didn't," was the answer. "Her mother, I know, has tried to save her the know-

ledge. Yet she may know. Monica is strange in many ways, and not at all given to confidences. Lena, I am convinced, believes her ignorant, and doubtless her daughter would be inclined to encourage the idea. I'm sorry there is not more congeniality between them. . . . It would have helped Lena to face the world. Lena behaved very bravely during the trial. She stood by her mother most faithfully, even staying with her in her cell. It is the courage she showed then, as a mere girl, that makes me love her so much and forgive her her little vanities and passion to seem young. Life began so ill for her, you see; she never had a chance when she was really youthful."

"But were circumstances so against Mrs. Perdoe?"

"My dear boy," was the answer, "what have 'facts' to do with such things. You know when people are placed in certain positions the damage is practically done, and no amount of exculpation, no proofs of innocence, ever much help. And the evidence was certainly terribly against Mrs. Perdoe . . . though the jury acquitted her. Indeed, few, besides Lena herself, believed her guiltless.

"Mrs. Perdoe," she continued, coming to the story at last, "had been left a considerable fortune by her husband, but she was extravagant, and her affairs were in rather a tangle when an old business friend of the family, a Mr. John Adams—a most courtly, delightful man, by the way—died at her home. He lived in Boston and had come to New York to see Mrs. Perdoe about the payment of a large sum of money he lent her.

He was sixty about, apparently in good health up to the time of his visit. It was warm weather, and Mrs. Perdoe gave him some lemonade, after which he was taken violently ill. There were several people staying at the house, and there was a good deal of testimony. Mrs. Perdoe insisted, as was natural enough, on being Mr. Adams's nurse; and it was she alone who administered the medicine. Instead of getting better, Mr. Adams grew worse and finally died. A post-mortem examination discovered in his stomach at least twenty grains of tartar emetic. Mrs. Perdoe's explanation was that she was in the habit of using this for plasters. . . . Her chest was delicate. It developed that the bottle of medicine left by the physician was overturned, and Mrs. Perdoe, in sending a servant to have the prescription refilled, ordered, at the same time, more tartar emetic of the apothecary. It may have been that no tartar emetic was given Mr. Adams, except in the lemonade, and it might well have been that Mrs. Perdoe mistook what she previously had for sugar; although the paroxysms of vomiting continued. It is one of the questions about which the doctors—and the lawyers—disagreed. I trust it was an accident. Certainly one has no right to assume the contrary in face of the verdict of the jury that freed her. Yet," she ended slowly, "public sentiment was always against her."

"And do *you* think her guilty, Miss Vanderhurst?"

"I have never wanted to ask myself the question," was the rather chill reply. "It makes no difference

—it never made any difference—in regard to my friendship for Lena. My sympathies were all for her, and I did what lay in my power—it was little enough—to make her lot brighter. I simply tell you the facts as I remember them; and I leave it to you to decide whether or not you still wish to marry one whose family history is, to say the least, unfortunate.”

“But I’m not thinking of that,” Harding answered. “The Eversleys’ past history is nothing to me. I haven’t asked you, Miss Vanderhurst, to tell me the story for any such reason; I want only to get at possible explanations for Miss Eversley’s rejection of me . . . why, seemingly, she doesn’t want to marry at all. What you say casts a new light on her treatment of me. If she is aware of her grandmother’s case, then it is easy to understand that pride would have made her refuse me. The night I proposed to her she had just read the manuscript of a new novel of mine, in which I used a situation suggested by Percy Colston—I see now he must have known of the Perdoe trial—that rather resembles Miss Eversley’s own. It was a study in hereditary influences, and I confess I drew pretty gloomy conclusions. Of course, she couldn’t think I modelled the plot on her grandmother’s case, aware that it was her case; and, indeed, I so changed things, had so few facts to go on, it can scarcely be called her grandmother’s story. Yet it was most unfortunate, and I don’t wonder she refused to listen to me, under the circumstances. There’s no way now I can efface

the blunder, I fear, unless, Miss Vanderhurst, you'll help me by acting as intermediary."

The spinster was pensive. "I don't know, Mr. Harding, that I want to be an intermediary. Still, I'll have a talk with Monica, and if I find out that she knows about her grandmother and is affected in the way you assume, I shall let you know. I can promise you that much, any way."

He saw, from the way she regarded him, that she was trying to make up her mind about it all.

"I like you the better for feeling as you do," she said finally. "It's nobler than the attitude of poor Lena's first suitor. Yet I can't say I approve of the match. After all, clean ancestry is of consequence to everybody"—with pride in her own unimpeachable forebears—"and even if we choose to disregard taint of blood, have we quite the right, do you think, to pass on a heritage of shame? You care for Monica now, but should you cease to care, your opinion as to the importance of such things may change. Such reflections may well have caused Monica to refuse you, granting it wasn't for the prosaic reason that she isn't in love with you."

"But I think she does care, and there is no danger of my ceasing to," he said. "And as to what you hold about clean ancestry, how many of us, Miss Vanderhurst, when it comes to that, can go back in one's family and not find something discreditable? I'm afraid if we were too particular, marriage would go out of fashion. I can only assure you again that what Monica's

grandmother did or didn't do can never alter my feelings for Monica herself."

"Well, I agree to do what I can," she returned, after some inward debate. "But I warn you, I hardly hope to influence Monica against her will. To be frank, I'm sorry, irrespective of her family history, your choice has fallen on her. Monica is quite fitted, I'm convinced, to take care of herself; and since I coifféd Sainte Catherine myself, I don't regard her spinster resolutions as such a tragedy. I'm not so certain, Mr. Harding, that marriage with her would be the helpful, solving thing for you. I'm not even sure you have quite the temperament for marriage, no matter who were your wife. Yet I may be wrong. And Monica may be the ideal mate for you. I'm sure I hope so . . . if you marry her. In fact, I'm always a hopeful person, a believer, you know, in the ultimate happy outcome of most things in life."

"Then you agree to be my ambassador?"

"Yes," she said, with a little sigh over it, that was not in keeping with her last statement; "I promise."

CHAPTER XIV

MRS. EVERSLEY'S bedroom suite was all a pretty woman of the world could require. The chamber in which she slept was large and well-lighted, and its mirrored walls offered at every turn flattering reflections of herself. Mrs. Eversley delighted in mirrors; she consulted them as a priestess consults the auguries of the gods. She was never lonely with this multiplied company of herself—moving as she moved, smiling when she smiled, paying her the compliment of servile imitation.

She spent most of the morning in her room. Rising late, she appeared downstairs only after the most careful attention to her toilette; even Monica had never seen her in a really negligent *négligée*. Indolent by nature, she pleaded "delicate health" as justification in consuming her morning hours idly. That delicacy had, happily, taken an agreeable form. It gave a touch of fragility to her figure, augmented youthful appearance. And it was the preservation of this charming anachronism that most mattered to her. The bills from the Institut de Beauté testified to that. Likewise the innumerable silver-stoppered bottles, jars, and other paraphernalia of her dressing table. Also the possession of her expensive maid—an accom-

plished Frenchwoman, somewhat *passée*; for Mrs. Eversley tolerated no rivalry, in either servants or guests. Pretty women never got invitations to her dinners, if she could help it!

Opening from the bed-chamber on one side was her beautiful tiled bath room; on the other a dainty boudoir, which had been copied, at Percy Colston's suggestion, from Madame de Sévigné's. It was into this she passed after rousing herself from her long Lady-of-Shalott-like musings before her glass, to glance over the *Figaro*, for its fashionable information, dip into the latest romance, study her *Paris-Parisien* for the year, or indulge in correspondence at her secretary, stocked with initial note-paper and private pneumatiques. . . . Mrs. Eversley loved her private pneumatiques. Thus the morning passed contentedly, without ennui; for one who lives for oneself can always live with oneself.

She lay awake, on the present morning, enjoying the twilight dimness of her wide curtained bed. The painful effects of the motor accident had worn off, except for some feeling of ache in her eyes. She had, indeed, the previous evening, felt so much better that she had ordered Simone to wake her in time to be dressed and receive the doctor in a becoming *matinée*. The doctor was a young man she had chosen for his delightful sympathetic understanding of her. His predecessor had not been like him. He had, in fact, been most brutal, in the way he warned her against the pernicious effect of certain cosmetics. "Your beauty, madame,"

he had said, "is, indeed, 'a fatal gift.' " After which she had summoned him no more.

She wanted to rise, yet rather dreaded Simone's knock. Bed was a comfortable place, and there were so many things to think about as she lay there. Alas, not all pleasant things. Miss Vanderhurst had told her of Percy Colston's reported engagement to Miss Buttercup Baxter, and the news had made her so inwardly spiteful with her well-intentioned informant that she had made a complete catalogue, while her friend chatted on, of the latter's personal defects: the grey hair, the crowsfeet, the wrinkled hands, the spinster figure. This news had cut her cruelly—cruelly as some of Percy's speeches. The loss of her adjutant was now irretrievable, she told herself, and she needed him as much as ever. She couldn't get on without him, any more than she could without the dangerous cosmetics her former doctor wished to ban. She needed him for her dinners, her neglected salon; she needed to consult him about her toilettes, about the right people to know; she needed him to tell her what books to read, the things she ought to say; in short, she needed him for everything. He was like a drug. He wasn't good for her, but she had got used to him; and the things that weren't good for one—like certain table delicacies she couldn't afford to touch—were what one always most wanted. And he had deserted her for a common American, the daughter of a nobody, who sold "Surpassing Ceylon." She could hardly credit it. But then, everybody loved money!

Herself included, she might have added: but, then, she needed money; and it was one of those unpleasant facts she hated to face. Only it was getting necessary to face it. There were so many pressing bills—bills that couldn't be laid aside—that came from exigent tradespeople without proper respect for those who had to dress and live up to fashionable requirements. Bills had become more and more troublesome as she realized she had long lived beyond her income. Indeed, it was no longer income that she was living on, but capital. She had drawn liberally on it for years, without thinking of the consequences, without remembering the day of reckoning; it was all very stupid. "Her" capital was how she put it, but, in reality, it was Monica's—the fortune Colonel Eversley had left his daughter, and of which she, Mrs. Eversley, had been made sole executrix. — Nothing remained now but Monica's money. Monica might have claimed it on arriving at age; but she hadn't. She had signed papers and left her mother a free hand—and Mrs. Eversley had been very free. Besides, Monica seemed to enjoy supporting herself. . . . It was one of the queer sides of her nature.

Yet the remembrance of it all made Mrs. Eversley uncomfortable at times, now that she drearily realized that she wholly depended on what was left of her daughter's fortune. It came as an afterthought; as Monica was herself an afterthought. It had aroused a tardy, sweet maternal solicitude about this daughter of hers; and the solicitude took the practical form of

trying to marry her off to someone sufficiently rich not to want a *dot*, who might provide them both with a pleasant home, in case she was compelled to give up her Neuilly house. She had really been most self-sacrificing about Monica's future, since in encouraging Monsieur Fernet's suit she had risked—and lost—the friendship of Percy Colston. Of course, in talking with Monsieur Fernet she had had to allude in a general way to her daughter's "little fortune"; but he was rich, not grasping, as French suitors usually were, and she had flattered herself that, in the end, the question of the *dot* would be got over somehow. . . . He had seemed so much in love with Monica's cold statuesqueness; indeed, it was quite a case of Pygmalion and Galatea. She found it difficult even to try to forgive Monica for not being coerced into the match. It really was very selfish. Why Monica refused Monsieur Fernet was as inexplicable as why she hadn't listened to Mr. Nicolls. It was quite time she married somebody. As to Mr. Nicolls, she had, it was true, been glad at the time; there hadn't been enough money. She regretted it now in a way, since, as it had afterwards developed, the young man would inherit one day from an uncle.

From these past issues Mrs. Eversley's mind travelled to the present one of her daughter and Julian Harding. Miss Vanderhurst had confirmed her suspicions that Mr. Harding was in love with Monica. He had acted so differently of late, scarcely came to the house any more. He wasn't rich, it was true, but Madame de

Kansa had prophesied that he would make name and fortune. And she believed implicitly in Madame de Kansa's forecasts; and as Miss Vanderhurst also was sure he would arrive—had, indeed, half arrived already—with his first novel selling so well, he seemed not a bad substitute for Monsieur Fernet. How few girls had Monica's matrimonial chances! And *why* didn't she take advantage of them? It was most provoking. It seemed quite an irony of fate that she, Lena Eversley, so worldly wise, who planned, calculated, should have such a disappointingly unambitious daughter. Well, something had to be done. Monica must be made to think of somebody besides herself. She was so inconsiderate, so self-absorbed!

Simone interrupted Mrs. Eversley's meditations by bringing in her tray of chocolate and the morning's post. While Simone let in the light, her mistress tasted the chocolate, and vented a fretful exclamation. . . . What wretched stuff! Simone was growing so careless, and she was always grumbling about arrears of wages. Servants nowadays seemed to have no idea of the kind of submission they owed their employers. Mrs. Eversley pushed the chocolate aside, and took up her letters. Half of them looked like bills . . . always bills! She opened one or two of the less dubious envelopes. Only invitations to stupid things everybody got. She broke the seal of another. Ah, that was different. A card to the Austro-Hungarian Embassy. That was select. Few Americans managed

to get invited . . . and how she hated Americans! She had never mastered her old dread of them and what they might know. Yet the worst of her recent scares was the night of Monsieur Chélard's *première*, when she was persuaded that Percy Colston was whispering her story into the Baroness de Chanzy's ear. She had discovered he had only pretended to—to make her uncomfortable and indulge his spite. She had got him to promise he wouldn't ruin her; and, after all she had done for him, he might well promise it. He had been very nasty about it though, and the things he had said had caused those odious tears in the carriage, disfiguring her cheeks, which, alas! she was never able to bathe, particularly not in tears. The card to the Austro-Hungarian Embassy elated her a little, though, unfortunately, she wouldn't be able to appear at the reception. In anticipation of the card she had ordered a new gown of a new maker, who was more sensible about being paid some day or other than former ones she had dealt with. She demanded of her maid if the frock had come.

"Yes, madame, it arrived last night."

Simone's manner was not particularly gracious. If her mistress was bothered by bills, she was bothered by a lover who spent her wages for her . . . that is, when her wages were paid.

"Let me see it." Mrs. Eversley's tone was like an eager child's.

Her serving-woman fetched the box. Mrs. Eversley

sat up in bed to watch her undo it. She was reflecting how well the gown would go with her black plumed Virot hat.

"You think I look best in mixed colours?"

"Yes, madame."

The gown was drawn from its tissue wrappings, and Simone spread it over her knees for her mistress's criticism.

It was a charming thing. A black-and-white striped silk, with old lace and knots of red velvet.

Mrs. Eversley studied it. "Why didn't she trim it as we agreed. I hate *couturières* who make changes without consulting one. If she disobeys my orders, I'll go back to Pasquier and Loisellier. Besides, they always know what makes one look young."

Simone smiled disagreeably. "And their last account, madame? You forget they said that they would supply no more dresses until you settled it."

Mrs. Eversley sighed. "These insufferable tradespeople. . . . But I must have those velvet knots changed."

The doctor arrived, and the interview left his patient depressed, half hysterical. She had the feeling he hadn't told her the worst. As it was, it was a tragedy. She must remain in her room. The consulting oculist whom he had brought hinted she would have to wear glasses. The shock of her fall had injured her sight rather seriously. He used some strange Latin term dealing with refraction that made her shudder. She might not see things quite as they were. Perhaps

that was why the velvet knots of her new gown looked so ugly, an opinion in which Simone had not concurred. The optical trouble was rare, the doctor remarked, and quite interesting from a medical point of view. But glasses would help to correct it, if she wore them constantly. Glasses! She thought of the horror she would be in them. It was the end, then. She would not, could not, appear in public with glasses on.

She was in a despairing, irritable frame of mind when, later on, Monica came into her room, after discreetly rapping, to ask how she was and to offer to read her the *Herald*.

"I don't care to hear it," her mother said fretfully. "What is the use of knowing what other people are doing if I can't do anything myself. Did the doctor tell you that awful thing about my eyes?"

"Yes, but he said that if you wore glasses . . ."

"But I *can't* wear glasses, make a fright of myself. I should be ridiculous, a horror. My poor eyes! How can I endure not seeing things as they are."

Monica reflected that her mother never *had* seen things as they were.

"I'm sorry I spoke of it, since it distresses you."

"I only wish you never distressed me in any other way," was the reply. "You have always distressed me. You distress me now by wearing that old black skirt. I hate black. . . . It reminds me of death. I had to put it on when your father died, of course. I respected him, and his sudden death was a terrible

shock. I said, as I looked into the glass: 'This has made me look ten years older.' And it had. I do wish you wouldn't put on those dull things."

"But I don't care about clothes."

"I know you don't, and that's why you look so plain half the time. To-day you are positively homely . . . pale, worn out, and I don't know how old. You wouldn't look so if you thought more about your appearance. No one of our family ever was plain; we've been famous beauties for generations. And always successes in society. But you're so different. I don't know why you hate to go about."

"Because it has become a habit, I suppose. You never cared to take me out when I was younger. I'm willing to leave it to you, who enjoy it."

"Pray don't try to put the blame on me," her mother said irritably. "You know you've never cared for anybody or anything, except your foolish art, your silly charities. If you only had the interests of ordinary people. But, there, it's useless to discuss it all with you, you're so . . . so impossible. I often wonder, unless it's the Eversley in you, how it happens you are like that. Nobody in our family ever was, I'm sure. We always cared for society, never thought of earning a living, or teaching odious people how to do things. If poor people can't manage for themselves, they ought to starve. I detest all this fuss about the lower classes. The ones to sympathize with are society persons. They have far worse troubles than merely being a little hungry. It encourages the

masses to be impertinent and think themselves as good as we are. Simone has grown simply unbearable. She doesn't care how she massages me or does my hair. You're always talking about 'sparing my feelings.' I wish you would, once in a while."

"I try to at least."

"If you tried," her mother retorted in an impatient, grown-up voice that would have been a revelation to Harding and others, "you wouldn't keep me so anxious about your future. As though I hadn't enough on my mind as it is. But when is one ever allowed to think of oneself! I want to talk seriously to you," she went on, allowing her daughter to arrange the cushions on the *chaise-longue* where she had established herself. "Tell me why Mr. Harding has given up coming here. Have you quarrelled with him, or what has happened? I know there's something. I remember how oddly he behaved last Christmas night when he came into the salon to say good-night. Did he propose to you?"

"Yes," was the reluctant reply.

"Well?" Mrs. Eversley urged. "I mean, did you refuse him?"

"Yes." Monica's voice expressed the dislike of a reserved nature to be catechised.

"Pray, don't answer me in that yes-and-no way. Why did you refuse him? He's a well-bred, agreeable man. Madame de Kansa says he has a brilliant future. He ought to be able to support you decently . . . and much more than that. Authors make no end of

incomes out of books in America, these days—the successful ones.”

“All that has nothing to do with it.”

“Then what has? You are very hard to suit, it seems to me. Mr. Nicolls didn’t suit, nor Monsieur Fernet. I wish you’d be frank with me, and say what *would* suit. I get so tired of your reticences about everything.” Mrs. Eversley was enjoying all an invalid’s privileges to be querulous.

“But I have told you often enough, mother, that I have no wish to marry.”

“Yes, but without giving me any good reason for such a silly resolve. Is it because you think yourself above marrying? You fancy yourself very clever, I know; so much cleverer than other people. Really, your airs estrange one so. One can never be at ease with you. If only I had a *sympathetic* daughter.” She sighed.

“If I haven’t been sympathetic, it’s because I never have quite understood you,” Monica answered temperately; for she had learned to practise self-control in talking with her mother.

“That’s because you’ve never tried to understand me. You think me vain and foolish. You look down on me from your superior heights. You imagine you know life . . . and you don’t. If you did, you would see the advantages of society, of your youth. Ah, if only I had *your* chances! I assure you I’d not be such a fool, as not to make the proper use of them. You’ll wake up some day, when it’s too late, and realize your

mistake. Something has to be done, as I was saying to myself this morning. My affairs have been going all wrong. I have had severe money losses. It's been very unfortunate and not at all my fault. I've managed the best I could on what I have. Really, I don't know what is to become of us, after awhile. If I had not been so true to your father's memory, I might have married, of course. But it's no use thinking of that now. It lies with you to smooth things for both of us. You owe it to me for the sacrifices I've made. If you married—Mr. Harding, say—you wouldn't need the trifle your father left you. Americans don't ask for *dots*, and I'd merely use the income of your money for the few years that remain to me," and Mrs. Eversley's voice became pathetic. She added with resignation: "I suppose I *could* somehow get on with it."

Mrs. Eversley spoke with the confidence of one who believes that the most improbable statement, if uttered positively enough, disproves any self-evident fact. It was the method she adopted to support the fiction of her girlishness, the complexion selected, the figure which in reality outshone that of most genuine *ingénues*. In a way, she got to believe a good many of the things she asserted, and she took it for granted that Monica believed them, too. She did not know her daughter very well. She had put her at school, where she had forgotten her, as she had forgotten her own age until the embarrassing fact of a grown-up offspring forced it on her. She had never, however, quite credited it.

certainly not to the degree of carrying Monica about with her as a testimony to passing time. It had been inconvenient enough to have her under the roof which she necessitated. It was one thing to flit about Europe, from capital to capital, from one friend's house to another, as an engaging young widow. Quite another to move with Monica at her heels like a serious, thoughtful shadow.

"Yes, I should think you might manage on the income," her daughter responded, after a moment. "It can't be so very small an amount since I've never touched it. And that, of course, has added to the capital. However, if it's that which troubles you, I can relieve your mind. You are welcome to the income. I can go on doing without. My tastes are not extravagant, and I know how to support myself. I like to work."

Mrs. Eversley felt a touch of uneasiness. She had the uncomfortable idea that her daughter, generously indifferent as she showed herself, might not be quite pleased if aware that this repudiation had already been taken for granted, and the accumulated income, to which she referred, had already been applied to pay for her mother's toilettes and dinners, or the expensive little trifles she had given Percy Colston to keep him amiable. Monica had such a difficult way of looking at things, was so unnecessarily nice on points of that sort. Mrs. Eversley was, accordingly, rather relieved to escape the issue by taking up her daughter's last words.

"Like to work!" she exclaimed. "What rubbish, my dear. A young, good-looking girl preferring to grub, when she might marry and be cared for. One might think you had no family or traditions. People *owe* something to their position in life. I'm sure I've tried to live up to mine. I can't forget my mother moved in the most exclusive circles. Indeed, I've often wondered how you can look so much like her and be so different."

Monica winced, as though the remark struck a raw nerve.

"Don't, mother," she said painfully. "I can't bear you to say that . . . that I look like her."

At the shiver of repugnance, Mrs. Eversley stared, thinking her daughter was under some misconception as to the compliment.

"I'm sure I don't know why you can't. Everybody thought her beautiful. I wish you had half her charm. You could have copied her and not suffered, I assure you."

Monica's eyes darkened, and she regarded her mother a moment in silence. She had patiently listened to the other's taxing talk, but she was still under a strain from the conversation she had had, the previous day, with Miss Vanderhurst. It had left her disturbed in many ways, and she had passed a rather wakeful night in which she had lived afresh the old tragic issue of her earlier girlhood. She was now so candid with herself, that she was disposed far more than her wont, to be impatient with her mother's deceptions.

Indeed, Mrs. Eversley hardly seemed to be her mother, and she surprised herself as much as the invalid, gracefully leaning back in the pale blue *matinée*, by saying:

"How can you speak of her as you do? As long as you don't praise her, hold her up as a model, I can, in a way, endure the deception. . . ." She broke off, to add, with some emotion, "You say I'm not frank with you. Why haven't you been frank with me? Do you suppose I don't know, haven't known for years, the truth about my grandmother?"

"What do you mean?"

Mrs. Eversley tried to be natural, but she didn't succeed. Her voice was like that of a scared child.

"What she was accused of . . . about the trial."

It was said at last, and Monica felt all the relief of ending this pretence of ignorance. She had felt much the same in her talk with Miss Vanderhurst. When she saw that that spinster desired to find out if she knew of the family skeleton, she had said that she did. She hated false rôles; it had never been her instinct to fill them. Her tone in conversing with Miss Vanderhurst had, however, been less prosaic than in speaking with her mother. She knew the value of being prosaic with Mrs. Eversley.

"I sent to America for a report of the case . . . after I learned the truth," she continued, and from her manner one might have supposed she referred to nothing more important than the weather.

It had its effect. Mrs. Eversley's fear of an agitating scene subsided. She had laboured to keep the

disgraceful knowledge from Monica. But since Monica knew . . . well, it was like getting rid of a weight, almost a pleasure, in fact, to have done with half a lifetime of silence. Here, suddenly and unexpectedly, a safe confidant was provided for her.

"And who told you?" Mrs. Eversley said interestedly, sitting up.

"Percy Colston. It was about the time Monsieur Fernet took his Prix de Rome. Mr. Colston threatened to tell everybody unless I pledged myself not to marry Monsieur Fernet. I answered that he might do as he pleased; but, as it was, I had no wish to marry Monsieur Fernet. Later, I spoke of my grandmother to Monsieur Fernet . . . told him she had been tried for murder."

Mrs. Eversley had got no further than the fact that Percy Colston had told of the blot on her family. "He told you?" she cried. "After he promised he would never mention it! And I trusted him, counted on his honour. How infamous of him!" she went on half tearfully. "And you were nice to him after that. How could you—had you no pride?"

"When it comes to pride. . . ." Then Monica checked herself. After all, Mrs. Eversley was her mother. "I don't know that I was ever particularly nice to him, as you call it. But I endured him because you liked him. He was your friend, or, rather, you fancied him so. I'm not sure," she continued, after a pause, "that I minded having him tell me. I think, perhaps, I was even grateful. He thought it hurt,

and, instead, I think it helped. It made me reflect about a good many things I should probably never have considered. Yes," she ended, as though impersonally weighing it all, "I am grateful to him for telling me."

"Grateful!" was her [mother's exclamation. "Grateful to Percy Colston for betraying me, for proving how false, how malicious he is! How much he has made me suffer! Yet I didn't think him capable of telling *you*. And you speak of gratitude!"

"Yes, because I hate deceptions. I like to have the truth, no matter what it costs. I often have wondered why you never told me yourself."

"Because you're not the person I could ever confide in . . . about anything," said her mother pathetically. "I kept the thing from you for your own sake . . . just as I've made a hundred sacrifices for you. I often *wanted* to tell you. It would have been a relief. You don't know what it cost me not to. Think of living all these years with you and not telling. Yes, it cost me a great deal."

"Yes, I think I can understand," Monica said gently, after reflection. "It was kind to want to spare me."

"I've always been kind to you," Mrs. Eversley cried, with a little wail of self-pity, "though you have never appreciated it. I've wanted to see you married, protected from the world that has been so cruel to me. My heart is set on your marrying Mr. Harding."

"But I can't, mother. . . . It's out of the question," was the response. And Monica sighed wearily at this return to the issue between them.

"You mean he knows about . . . about the shameful injustice done my mother?" Mrs. Eversley sharply queried; "and does not wish to marry you now? Or is it because you don't care for him? Tell me the truth."

"Yes, he still wants to, I think," Monica said hesitatingly, thinking of what Miss Vanderhurst had told her. "Although he knows about my grandmother," she added, a little pensively.

"Well, then. . . ."

"But it doesn't alter matters. . . ."

"You don't care for him, you mean?"

"No, it isn't that . . . that I don't care."

"Then why, pray?"

"I have my reasons."

"Then let me have them. Really, I get so tired of you never speaking out. It is one of the provoking things about you."

"But it would only wound you."

She hesitated, seeking to put it most soothingly to her mother's ear—

"Well, for one thing I think of what marriage would mean under the circumstances. Mr. Harding himself might care enough to forget it all. But I am thinking that—that if there were a child. . . ."

"Child!" her mother interrupted. One or two tears, escaping her eyes, had dried on her cheek, and,

reaching out for her powder puff, she removed the stain. She was beginning to recover. If she dreaded the old scandal, she dreaded more the effect of feeling too much. "The idea of you, an unmarried girl, thinking of 'children.' I don't know what to make of this generation. Girls of these days don't seem to have a sense of modesty. It comes of the impossible books you read, your 'advanced views.' If you went to church and were more conventional, such ideas wouldn't enter your mind. I've always lamented you were so irreligious. It's one of your great defects." Mrs. Eversley believed in religion. She believed in having a church—a fashionable one. It wasn't *chic*, in her opinion, to do without a God, as apparently Monica did.

"And what 'circumstances,' " she continued indignantly, "need debar you? If your grandmother was misjudged, if she suffered a great wrong, is that a reason for speaking of her in such a fashion?"

"And you think she *was* misjudged?" Monica returned. "I'm sorry, mother, to enter into a discussion about it. Yet I did not provoke it, did I? I have no wish to hurt you . . . if you hold her innocent."

"And you dare hint that *my* mother was guilty of a crime?" Mrs. Eversley exclaimed, stirred anew. "Don't you know that she was *acquitted*? Why, she was a martyr, a victim of circumstances. And the jury recognized it."

Monica was silent, and the mother viewed her

irritably, seeing that she did not share the jury's opinion.

"You don't think her innocent?" Mrs. Eversley insisted.

"No, since you ask me," was the reply. "She may have been . . . I don't say no. But it is not how it impressed me, after reading the case."

What Monica could not have added was her further impression from the documentary evidence she had sent for, that Mrs. Eversley had perjured herself to save Mrs. Perdoe.

The mother smiled bitterly. "How wise you are! So much wiser than the judge and jury! But you never knew her. If you had, you'd have seen she was *incapable* of crime. How wonderfully she behaved in court! She was always *grande dame*, my mother. In her cell she was like Marie Antoinette at the Conciergerie. She endured everything in silence, with dignity. She never once complained. But why," and Mrs. Eversley's voice broke into a sob, "do you bring it all up again. You've never suffered as I have. You don't know what suffering is."

"Yet I think I can guess . . . what suffering is," was the answer. Monica's voice was gentle, and she put out her hand to comfort her mother. It was a little awkwardly done, for there had never been much exchange of affection between them. At the touch on her arm, Mrs. Eversley drew it away. She had no wish to accept comfort from one who doubted Mrs. Perdoe's innocence.

"Yet if you have suffered," Monica said after a silence, as though she struggled to understand things through her mother's character, "how can you so have forgotten? To have lived as you have done . . .".

"And suppose one remembered. Don't you know that it's only by forgetting one lives at all? Yet I haven't forgotten, I've only *tried* to forget. And so you blush for your grandmother. You ought to blush for yourself. I was never ashamed . . . only I did want to forget, forget, if the world had let me," she sobbed.

"And was that why you came to Europe? I think I'd have stayed and fought it out, if I believed in her as you do. What have you gained by it, mother? Sacrificing yourself to Percy Colston, because he knew your secret. And you speak of forgetting."

"It's easy for you to say that," Mrs. Eversley retorted tearfully. "You have been spared it all. You haven't lived a life of hateful whispers and gossip wherever you went." And she looked indignation at her daughter, who could sit so calmly there and tell her her duty. "What are you, after all, but an ignorant girl. I brought you up to please yourself, flatter your vanity with high-flown ideas, spared you everything!" And her face expressed the sublimity of self-imagined sacrifice.

"You couldn't spare me myself," Monica said half audibly. She spoke rather to herself than to her mother. She, too, had suffered in her own way. She was suffering now, through the weakness of her

heart. The memory of the woman—who had been weak—in *The Labyrinth of Life* was with her. It helped—that counselling memory—to a mastery of herself. But other things besides the book had helped her, too. She had long schooled herself to suppress emotion, in encouraging her head to rule her heart. Yet there were times when she almost wished herself different . . . that she might not see duty so plainly.

Her mother had not heard the words, nor would she have understood them if she had. She was thinking of her shadowed girlhood. "I was about to make my *début*," she said, as if that was the greatest of her disappointments. "Such darling dresses as were ordered. But I never put them on. The world shut its doors; I had no youth; I only had sorrows, disillusion. I was jilted by the only man I ever loved. I don't know what would have become of me if I hadn't met your father. Fortunately, he didn't know."

"Didn't know!" Monica echoed wonderingly. "You never told him?" She had cherished her father's memory for the nobility he had shown in wedding the daughter of a criminal.

"If I'd told him, he mightn't have married me," was the answer. "And it was an escape, I came to Europe . . . and had a little happiness. I'd be happy now, if there wasn't all this trouble about money. You think it doesn't matter, but it does. You'll learn that some day."

She spoke truer than she knew.

"I *can't* do without it," Mrs. Eversley continued.

"I know I shall never manage on the pittance left me."

"But I shall work," her daughter said.

"And what about things like these?" And Mrs. Eversley indicated her luxurious bedroom, its mirrors, its toilette table with silver-backed brushes, flagreed phials of perfume, the hundred little utilities for personal use.

A vision of a reasonable existence for them had come to Monica almost in spite of herself. But alas, she was forgetting that it demanded that different life, a different mother. "Why not leave Paris?" she asked. "We can find some quiet place far away from it all, where there are real things of happiness to be had, instead of these trumpery pre-occupations. Think of the kind of people you have gathered about you, the false, paradoxical talk at your dinner parties. It is all such irony, mother, surely it can't mean much to you, such a world. You say life is almost over for you. Has it even begun?"

"What nonsense you talk." And Mrs. Eversley stifled a yawn. It was a style of conversation that always bored her. "Really, one might think, my dear, that you'd stepped out of a book. You have the ideas that one might expect of a governess. Bury oneself in the provinces, vegetate in a Swiss Pension, do without dresses, society. Why," she cried, enjoying her indignation, "you are asking me to give up what belongs to my caste. Yes, I think you *had* better read

the *Herald*. See if that odious Baroness de Chanzy was really dining with the Duchess of Blackmore yesterday. These discussions only try me . . . and I hate to be tried." And she settled herself more comfortably on her chair.

"I ought to add, though," she remarked, "that you are a singularly unfeeling girl. If you had any heart, you couldn't treat Mr. Harding as you do. Julia Vanderhurst tells me he has grown cynical and dissipated, and I know she thinks you led him on. You heard yourself what she said."

"Yes, I heard," was the hesitating answer, and Monica took up the *Herald*.

"Well, I shouldn't like to have his ruin on *my* conscience," her mother observed. "And such a pleasant, dear fellow he is, too."

She spoke rather sentimentally. It was another of the sacrifices she had made to her daughter, she reflected. She liked Harding and had enjoyed their little flirtation; and it had been vexatious to be discarded for her daughter. Fernet had begun in the same way, but she had found that the sculptor wasn't as hesitating in actions as he was in speech, and it had been difficult in his case to keep things where she wanted them. And she did not want a real *liaison*, any more than she desired to marry. In that she had been truer to her late husband than she had been to the more serious side of her nature. She was afraid of marriage, of its ageing effects; and it had not been hard to sacrifice heart to beauty. The biggest struggle had

been Percy Colston. She loved him as much as she was capable of loving anyone; and she believed she could have persuaded him to marry her. The marriage would have been a mistake: she knew he was selfish and irritable, and she would have constantly made him lose his temper. She seldom lost her own, but she had the unfortunate habit of losing other people's for them. "Crabbed youth and age may not live together"—she admitted the truth of Percy's corrected Shakespeare. Yet she sometimes sighed over Percy, as she sighed now a little over Harding. The latter, she thought, had not shown much taste in preferring Monica to herself.

CHAPTER XV

HARDING sat in the Eversleys' salon wondering if Monica would receive him. The servant had been instructed to deny her to callers on account of her mother's illness, but Harding had insisted on sending up his name.

The salon looked sober in the grey afternoon light; its atmosphere seemed to have absorbed something of the changed sentiment of the household. It was as though it recognized that a good deal of its usefulness had passed with the passing of Percy Colston. Eden left to its original simplicity, after the exciting Adam-and-Eve episode, may have experienced the reactionary insipidity that Mrs. Eversley's drawing room appeared to feel, on the present February day. The hour was too early for lighted lamps, too late not to suggest the thought of them. The half twilight depressed Harding as he looked about him. The furniture, that had tried as hard to look old as Lena Eversley tried to look young, was a duller gilt than usual, as if it, like everything else, was affected by a sense of mental mildew in the air. There was no longer any appropriateness in being bright, alas, without a Percy Colston, and other epigram-minded visitors to make Wednesday evenings seem champagne on the frothiness of intellectual small beer. Mrs.

Eversley was lying above, afflicted with the strange malady of not seeing things as they were. Perhaps it was Harding who did not see the salon as it really was. There was a dampness about the fading day that almost warranted the insensate chairs and cabinets, in whose venerable character Harding believed, feeling a rheumatic twinge in keeping with their supposed age. The Clodion Psyche—whose affected smile had often reminded him of Mrs. Eversley's efforts to please—looked serious and sorry for herself; as though she missed her Eros as its owner missed her Percy, similarly lost through indiscretion. Certainly the bust appeared less conceited than usual. Harding, glancing at it, was reminded of the bust of Buttercup and the quarrel between that young woman's present suitor and the past suitor of Monica Eversley, Monsieur Fernet.

Life seemed to be one complication of suitors, none of whom suited. For instance, Colston, though accepted, did not suit Buttercup but only one of her moods, he mused. What would the unsuitableness of the engagement lead to? . . . A rupture, of course, in the end; since the poet prided himself on quarrelling with everybody in time. But would it be a rupture before or after marriage? He had the feeling that the engagement was a consequence of ruptures all round. Colston, having, as he knew, broken with Circour over the price of Buttercup's bust, was probably in quest of a new home. Had there been no rupture between himself and Buttercup the night of the Opéra masked ball, her acceptance of the poet might not have

suggested itself as the afterthought of pique he was inclined to think it. Her air with him prior to the sudden announcement of the betrothal had been inconsistent enough to warrant him in that flattering conclusion. Harding's thoughts wandered, like his gaze, from the Psyche to the "little salon," but paused there only long enough to reflect how its littleness suited the scenes it had witnessed and to which the *portière*, now oddly limp, had been like a drop-curtain. Would he ever forget the jingle of its rings as Mrs. Eversley drew it shut! It was behind it he had overheard that lady practising a part with the sculptor that had ended in such sadly unexpected developments. He had been an intruder in that small drama then. Now he was one of the main actors.

Harding, as he waited for the servant's return, felt as sober as the salon looked. What Miss Vanderhurst had told him, after her promised talk with Monica, had been illuminative; it revealed that the latter knew, as he had felt she did, of the family scandal, and it supplied a clue to her behaviour towards himself and the world; explained a great deal about her that had puzzled him. He could understand that Monica's way of taking the fact of criminal ancestry would differ from that of ordinary natures. It gave a new, dignifying reason for her sobriety, and modified his first conception of her aloofness and air of the superior young woman treating others to Scotch sermons.

His coming to the house to-day had been preceded by a rather bold act; and on the way he was sup-

ported by the belief that he could in a masterly way brush aside the cobwebs of complications between them. Yet now he was there, he was less certain of himself. He had the feeling that the conversation he had pictured as taking place, might after all be of a different character. He had perhaps too much counted on his attitude towards things, too little on hers. He had been very eloquent in the imaginary dialogue, she quite inept; yet in former arguments, he recalled as he sat impatiently waiting, that she had held her own. Still, to counterbalance this disheartening reflection, had he not in his left breast inner pocket—the place for it—a letter from Monica in which, practically, she confessed she loved him?

It was this letter that brought him to her. It was in answer to one he had written her. Before he received hers there had, however, arrived a telegram bidding him destroy the letter unread. Instead he had broken the seal and read it many times. He had done this after some debate with himself over the impropriety of disobeying her command; but it had ended in a decision that he had the right to know the contents. Instinct told him that within the envelope lay the truth of her feelings towards him; and the truth about them was necessary to him, to their common happiness. A woman's letter was herself. He had Maupassant's authority for that. And Maupassant knew women. Monica might deceive him by mastering her exterior self, by treating him coolly; but in the prohibited letter he was sure she had unveiled her heart. "The

black words on paper, they are the soul all naked," Maupassant, in referring to woman's pen, had said. And after reading Monica's answer, he was confident he had won her love.

He had waited some time before he heard the trailing of her skirt. He knew it was she, for the sounds of her movements were individual as other things about her; her step was sober and stately, it had none of the *frou-frou* of her mother's frivolous, half-floating advance. The dull afternoon obscured the room, but there was enough light to tell him that her face was paler than its wont, and not auspicious to his lover's errand.

"I am sorry, Mr. Harding," she said, as she shook hands, "but my mother is not well to-day. I came because your message by the servant was so urgent. . . ." She took a seat, as though it was a concession to politeness at the price of heart discretion. It was far from the nearest one left him to select. He saw that she suspected a pitfall of some sort, and nerved herself to avoid it.

It looked to him, in truth, like a case of Katherine-taming.

"I read your letter," he said, without prelude. "And after that, I had to see you. Forgive me for insisting . . . I don't want to seem inconsiderate. But I couldn't wait."

"You read my letter?" she echoed, incredulously; and her eyes lighted indignantly as he assented.

"Yes; and I'm not ashamed to confess it. Our

happiness depended on it. If I hadn't, I should have forgiven myself. It was my right to know the truth. And I was sure it was there. Nothing now can take away the knowledge . . . that you care, Monica. You understand—I had to!”

She disregarded the appeal of his voice; her face was hard. “But the letter was mine, not yours. It was as sacredly mine as though I had never sent it. How could you!”

“I expected you would be angry, of course. But I resolved to risk that. Say it was indelicate, dishonourable even. . . . Perhaps it was. What do I care about that, since the letter gave me hope? Do you think, when love is at stake, that a man can destroy such a letter unread and congratulate himself on his honour? The only thing that mattered was to know how you really felt towards me. You can't deny now, Monica—after writing what you did—that you do care. And that is why I've come. I want you to listen to me. . . .”

“But I don't want to listen, Mr. Harding,” she interrupted; “it's for you to listen to me. Since you read my letter—against my express wish—you shall know why I wrote it. Miss Vanderhurst said you were wasting your life, that you had given up work, seemed to have lost ambition, were wretched. Then came a letter from you, saying that if only you could feel I cared for you, it would help you, no matter whether I married you or not. So I answered out of impulse, because I was distressed, because I wanted to

give you what support I could. Then, after I mailed the letter, I realized it could do no good . . . but only harm. Your coming here to-day shows that instead of helping, the letter only made you more unwilling to accept the situation. And you must accept it," she went on resolutely. "I cannot, will not, marry you. No weakness of mine can alter that. If I saw my mistake before, I see it doubly now."

"But surely you don't regret giving me one hour of happiness?" he remonstrated.

"I only regret its consequences for you," she said, after some struggle with herself. "If it really could help, I'd be glad. Naturally, I have no wish to be thought hard and unsympathetic. Only it doesn't alter my reasons for feeling as I do."

"Don't call them reasons," he broke in upon her rebellious admissions. "Why should you take the stand that, because your grandmother was charged with a crime, you must be sacrificed? It makes no real difference to me if she committed a hundred crimes, instead of merely being accused of one. It doesn't make you less lovable because you imagine yourself under some shadow; you're more to me, in fact, because you have suffered through what the world ought long ago to have forgotten. Besides, it has forgotten."

"It isn't a question with me what the world has remembered or forgotten. It is what I myself remember. I am convinced that my grandmother *did* commit the crime of which she was accused. And I know that

you, too, think it. Do you suppose," she continued after a moment's pause, "that I don't still recall *The Labyrinth of Life* and what it tried to prove? You say its views are not your own, but, anyway, it showed what they might have been. And that is enough. If nothing else kept us apart, your book would."

"But I have destroyed it!"

"Not the memory of it. Nor what it evoked . . . what it must always evoke for me. I am not a child, Mr. Harding . . ." she said, as though in the assertion she had gathered all her young womanhood together, "and I am not so ignorant of human nature as not to know that a man can say things, under the emotion of a moment, that his life mayn't prove. You say you love me, and I think perhaps you do. Yet any feelings you have for me, or I for you, can never blind me to what I recognize as duty. It is, I know it, my duty not to marry you. I'm glad to think you care for me—though it makes me unhappy. I oughtn't to listen to you, I don't want to listen to you. Use such arguments to women who only feel . . . and don't think. My protection has always been that I do think."

"You've spent your life thinking, Monica, instead of giving your heart a chance," he said. "I don't know how old you are—I doubt if you're much more than twenty-two. One of the things that has attracted me in you is that you're so slow at getting young. Of course, one doesn't really begin to get young until

one's thirty," he said lightly, putting it discreetly at that age for fear she would think him sneering at her mother; "but, even so, you ought to see that nothing matters so very much in life except the one great cause of living—love. You told me once you could do without love. Nobody can. Life becomes hideous, dry, uneventful. Be sensible, dear. Forget grandmothers, forget stodgy professors, forget me as a writer, as one who may do a great deal of wise talking in books, but who, after all—and it's the side I ask you to think of—wants love, as *you* want it, though you refuse to say so. Feeling, isn't it all feeling with us, when the last word is said?"

He saw that the eloquence of his voice, which gave eloquence to his words, had some effect upon her. Still she said:

"But feelings go, and reason remains. It isn't just now; it is the years to come. No"—and she seemed resolutely to dismiss the prospect he painted—"don't tell me what I owe myself. I know it all better than you. It's new to you, it is old—*old* to me." And in the assertion he understood what the years of knowledge had meant to her—those years in which she had dismissed Fernet because she did not love him, and Nicolls because perhaps she did. No, she wasn't young, except in her youth's suppressed unlogic. She faced him, dark-browed, a sturdy yet pathetic image of renunciation.

"Monica," he said, "don't you see that the years would bring us both happiness . . . together?"

She stirred with the resentment of one who feels her defences weakening. "You talk," she said, "as if you thought me a sentimentalist." She had lived with the type, in living with her mother. "As if 'feelings' were my one absorption. I am *not* that kind of woman, Mr. Harding. I might have been happier"—her voice faltered a little—"if I were. Yet I don't think so. People lose themselves in their feelings. I might be happier, I say, if . . . if I were like the woman in your book. But I am happy enough. I have my brains, my energy, my will to be useful. You mistake," she continued, with a lift of the head, "if you fancy I am in want of sympathy. I am strong, quite strong, to meet the future. And it isn't just, I know, to represent it as you do," she ended proudly.

"Nobody is as strong as you claim to be," he said; "though it's true, you are strong, Monica. It is why I want you to marry me. I need your help. You could make my life anything you chose; I am sure of that. You say you can face whatever the future may hold. If that's so, why can't you face a future with me? How does it keep us apart when neither of us accepts its theories?" In his earnestness with her, he quite forgot that he did accept its theories.

But she did not yield. "And aren't you," was her response, "playing with a theory now, as you played with those in your story? The theory, Mr. Harding, that we could ever be happy together. It's true that I don't believe in what the book held. But I once did.

It was then I resolved that I should never marry. You said to me that day in the Bois, you would like to know what my life had been; and I shall tell you a little now, so you may understand me. My life, I mean, since I learned about my grandmother. For, before that, it had nothing worth telling. Some five years ago, I first discovered," she went on, in her rich quiet voice, "what was the matter with my mother, the cause of the strange existence we led. How I learned the truth, doesn't matter. It is the fact that I *did* learn, I was still young enough to be shocked by it in the crudest sort of way. How could I have fancied such a thing . . . my mother's mother a criminal? I did not want to ask my mother about it, but I resolved to know all there was to know. So I sent to America and got the reports of the trial. I studied them carefully, because I wanted to have the *truth*, irrespective of judge and jury. And I came to the conclusion that my grandmother—notwithstanding the verdict—*was* guilty; that the evidence proved it. Thinking about it, I said to myself, that people do not do such things from mere impulse of temptation. That the causes of such crime lie deeper, come from a soul and mind radically wrong. It was a question of moral disease."

She drew her breath sharply, as though she lived again through something of those past emotions.

"I revolted against such a hateful heritage, suffered from the thought of it. It seemed cruel of life to have thrust it on me. That many people knew, that others suspected, never mattered as much, for I had already

learned to depend on myself"—and he guessed her mother's neglect to be a part of that schooling—"and I already had found interests outside of society. No, it was my sense of personal stain . . . of having criminal blood in my veins; that was what I resented most, what was so hard to get over. And it was then I vowed to myself I should not marry. One has no right to cause suffering for others."

She seemed to expect an assent to this; but he held himself in reserve, following her recital to seize on its weakness when his moment for argument should come.

"Then I began to recover, as one recovers from an illness of body. Intelligence came to the rescue. I told myself that inherited taint could be combated like everything else. Nature is too fair to deny us the strength to struggle against what is abnormal or vicious in us. And so I got back self-respect at last. My life had been an effort to overcome any wrong instinct that may have been passed down to me. But I still feel bound to keep the earlier promise I made, when weighed down by my heredity. It may be illogical, mere sentiment, in a way; but whatever it is, it is sacred to me. And," she ended, with a dignity that moved him, "you will not ask me to break it, I know."

"But, Monica," he said, catching her hand, "don't you see the wrong you do yourself by the confession. If you didn't, at heart, still hold the views you deny, you wouldn't remember such a pledge. I, too, have my ill-heritages . . . or say they are weaknesses of my own fostering, if you prefer. But, however that may be, I

ought to fight them . . . and I will fight them, if you will help. " And you can only help by marrying me, Monica. Why not fight these things together? You must see how much I need you. Don't tell me that promises are more to you than my happiness, my good. Have faith in me and what life together might give us. Your confidence in me will restore my own."

" Oh, why will you ask it," she cried, as he drew her to him. " You, who never found happiness for yourself, how can you find it for me? "

" Because there is no happiness that isn't found together," he answered.

" If only you were stronger," she whispered, brokenly, yielding to his kiss. " For I am a woman . . . who wants to be led."

" We shall lead each other. Or, rather, love shall lead us. That is best of all."

BOOK II. THE TEST

Book II: The Test

CHAPTER I

"To see Rothenbourg, to love in Venice," was a bit of fashionable counsel that Harding had wished to apply after his marriage the previous June. He and Monica had meant to stay in the old Bavarian town only a day or two, "to see it"; but already the Tauber valley was slipping on its Nessus shirt of burning foliage, and Harding had grown restless. He wanted to follow the storks, that were abandoning their nests on the tiled archways to go where perpetual summer reigned. Somehow he hated the thought of autumn. Not that he was unhappy, nor that he questioned happiness in the future. Nothing had marred his four months of married life. It was, perhaps, that he had been, if anything, too content, and summer had symbolized it.

At all events, he was tired of Rothenbourg; he wanted to travel now, as much as before he had argued to remain and rent the old little hunting-lodge, called the "Kaiserschloss," lying outside the town, which haply had been offered for the season by some artist friends of Monica's. It had charmed him to think of trying for awhile this picturesque, irresponsible house-keeping in the tumble-down landmark of other days. The experiment could hardly be called a failure, in spite of the small domestic tragedies it involved; there

had been a touch of romance in it all. But Harding had outlived the whim. Besides, it was to be his wander year, in which to recover health—for he had suffered during the past spring from a bronchial attack—and to acquire experience and material for work. It excused him and Monica for leaving Mrs. Eversley, still in a somewhat invalidic state, especially as Miss Vanderhurst had agreed to companion her during their absence; reports from that admirable spinster had continued to be reassuring, so the two had no reason to reproach themselves for lack of duty to “dear Lena,” as Miss Vanderhurst always called her old friend.

Leaving Paris had meant, too, to Harding, leaving old past states of mind, all the misery and tangle of his former life. He was wedded to the woman he had desired; he was enjoying fairly easy circumstances; his literary prospects were bright—the success of *The Horns of the Altar* was a proof that he could depend on his pen, free from former harassing conditions; and if the years of strain, and some months of reckless pleasure-seeking, had a little told on his constitution, it would only be a question of time until he was sound again in body and mind. He was surprised how, already, the old melancholy of spirits had been dissipated; and he told himself that much of what he had attributed to convictions of philosophy lay in unsatisfactory bachelorhood, in living alone and selfishly. Marriage had a tranquillising effect; everything seemed to dispose him to see things as he had sworn to Monica he really did see them. He felt

there was no reason to confess that, in a way, he had deceived her in repudiating his book, in claiming to be an optimist at heart. It had not been true then, when he had proposed to her, but it was true now. Why disturb the faith she had had in him, the faith she continued to repose in him? It was very sweet that she should believe so completely, should take him wholly for granted, should picture him already as far on the road to attaining her own reasoned feelings about existence.

He was only just beginning to know her, after these quickly passed months of marriage. The failure of her rejected lovers has been, perhaps, in their holding that she needed them. His success had been that he needed her. And it was his effort to prove that he really did need her, to show that his happiness and welfare depended on her help and love for him.

He continually told himself how satisfied he was with the love Monica gave him. True, it was not quite the kind of love he had dreamed of in his youth. In old, overburdened New York days, hearing *Tristan and Isolde* from cheap gallery seats at the Metropolitan he had recognized what capacity lay deep in his heart for some such passionate, reckless love. As the music sang into his nerves, burnt his sight with blur of tears, he had felt the answering cry arise in the exaltation of the hour. That was what he craved, the utmost of feeling, one infinite breath of abandonment and divine life of heart, and for it he would gladly pay the price. It was what he had dreamed; and

Monica was the reality. There was nothing of the Isolde about her. He had not cried for her as Tristan, as the whole passionate waves of the orchestra breaking like a foam-fraught sea on the audience had cried, "Isolde," until it was almost more than any heart could bear. But he, too, was the reality. The Tristan in him was only of the hour of such glorious glimpses into heart-emotions. With the music faded from his soul, seated again at the drudgery of his desk, there seemed little in him that warranted such a gift from life. And Monica, for all her contained nature, for all the maternal side of her love, had shown that her quiet feelings were deep. Her qualities were restful, compensating things, and he was content with them. He would be an ingrate not to be content. . . .

Monica, too, had had her dreams. She had not desired a Tristan as Harding had desired an Isolde; but her heart had conceived a very different type of lover from Julian: a man whose strength was greater than her own, who would do the "leading" which had been her cry in her troubled and unwilling surrender. As she had then confessed, she was, after all, "a woman," with a woman's instinct of dependence, in spite of the hardening fortitude of her nature which accident had fostered. It was no inconsistency of sex that had caused her to yield. She could have withstood the pleading of her heart well enough. But she had had a vision of a black sea, with a hand stretched out to her. A shipwrecked character had asked to be saved; and she could not resist the appeal.

She had not thought of the consequences to herself; had not stopped to reflect that the involuntary act might involve her own safety, that sometimes the clutch of the drowning draws down the would-be saviour.

Now that she had taken irrevocable pledges, she told herself, as Harding was telling himself, that she was content. Her love and care had already, it seemed, done her husband good. He was healthier in mind and body; he spoke sanguinely of the future, was full of plans for work, interested in travel, and he had not expressed regret, as she sometimes feared he might, at having destroyed *The Labyrinth of Life*. She had not wanted him to do it for her sake, but for his own, and he had assured her it was for his own. In a way it might seem a little thing, but it involved the question of conscience—what an artist owed to himself and to others. To her the philosophy of the book was pernicious: she had conceived of it as injuring lives, depriving people of courage, and in her opinion to sow broadcast on the world insincere and hurtful ideas was to ignore human responsibilities, to misuse talent. But she was enough the artist to realize what the sacrifice was: to cast the produce of one's brain into the waste basket, to kill what one had made live, even if it were unworthy; and she honoured Julian for the heroism, although she honoured him more for what underlay the heroism. It had shown her he was worthy of being loved. With that proof of the finer side of his characters he might well be

patient, while waiting for all that must eventually follow, the step by step whereby he would attain at last the high, reasonable plane of living on which she herself endeavoured to move.

So the months passed, and the next Spring came, finding them, after much shift of places, at the Hotel des Palmes, in the old Sicilian capital. It was almost a year now since their marriage, a lotus-eating year, and Monica was beginning to hope that Julian would soon have had enough of travel and settle down to a soberer, more useful existence.

CHAPTER II

ON a calm purple day the two undertook an excursion up Monte Pellegrino. The white Spring sunshine blazed on bare yellow rocks and wrung the odours out of weed and flower tufting the chasm-cleft mountain-side. Monica, for whom Harding had hired a donkey, seemed disinclined to talk; and he, walking beside her up the zigzagging viaduct, shared her thoughtful silence. Murmurs stole from the plain below, but so faint, drowned by distance, that they only emphasized a sense of remoteness from the world. As the road climbed they had wider glimpses of the Conco d'Oro: grey-green expanses of olives, in the wilderness of which twinkled white villas of wealthy Palmerians; farther, rose the domes and minarets of the Sicilian capital by the blue sea, all shrouded in tender opalescence.

Half-way up the mountain Harding espied some gorse that the Spring warmth had called into golden blossom.

"See," he said, showing his wife the sprig he had plucked, "the genista of Leopardi. It's the *fiore di deserto* of his famous poem. You remember the idea was suggested by seeing the plant growing on the crater of Vesuvius. It sums up his philosophy of life, won him the name of 'Poet of Pessimism.' Listen

to this." He read some of the lines from the volume of Leopardi he had picked up that morning at a bookstall of the Via Macqueda.

"That is a poem which should never have been given to the world," Monica observed when he stopped, "whatever personal wretchedness may have inspired it. I remember reading once how his publisher begged him not to print it for the sake of the young patriots whom it might rob of courage at a juncture when Italy needed their utmost effort. But Leopardi thought of his own fame, not of the political crisis his country had to face. He should have done as you did, Julian, with *The Labyrinth of Life*—destroyed it. Those who preach the doctrine of despair abuse their talents."

It was the second time since their marriage that Monica had alluded to the manuscript as destroyed. On the first occasion Harding's conscience had twinged him. After his talk with Monica about *The Labyrinth of Life* he had gone back to his room and rather grimly burned the manuscript—an act of sacrifice that at the moment satisfied his mood. Only, much later, when packing to leave for Italy, he found the original rough copy from which the one Monica had seen had been typed. It is not human nature to be heroic at all times; it was a shock to discover that his sacrifice had not been complete, but he could not nerve himself to completeness at that particular moment. He therefore tossed the bundle of papers into a spare trunk with books and other things, which he stored

in Paris. He wondered if he should not now tell Monica; but there was a drawn, tired look in her face which made him hesitate for her sake.

He put the flower between the pages of the book, which he restored to his pocket. Monica's gaze rested on his brooding face; she showed uneasiness and disappointment. Harding suddenly shook off his mood and smiled at her to dispel the atmosphere he had provoked between them. How seriously she took everything! She made no allowances for temperaments more elastic than her own.

"Forgive me," he said in a different tone, "I'm spoiling your afternoon. I am out of sorts to-day."

A turn in the road brought them in sight of the mountain shrine of Santa Rosalia, the patron saint of Palermo. They left the donkey with the *asino* who acted as their guide, and, ringing the convent bell that summoned a monk to the portal, they were conducted to the grotto chapel.

As they made their way along the cool, stone-flagged corridors they could hear the muffled sounds of a Gregorian chant. The chapel was in half gloom. They barely made out the fantastic vault of stalactites, the constant drip from which was carried off by a maze of lead pipes. Candles twinkled on the altar, before which knelt some dozen of worshippers. They paused in the background until the services were over.

When the black-garbed monks had filed out of the strange sanctuary, they approached the glass-protected shrine of the Saint. It was a sculptured figure of a

young woman, covered with votive jewellery, represented as asleep, while an angel, a lily in his hand, bent over her. In the mystic obscurity of the chapel there was something quite impressive about the wonder-working image carried with pomp through the streets of Palermo on occasions of plague and other public misfortune.

Harding left Monica here to climb the rough footpath that led to the summit of Monte Pellegrino, whence the eye had a vast panorama of sea and shore, with distant snow peaks; on clear days Stromboli could be picked out, and the pale apex of Ætna in its mantling mists.

When he returned, he found Monica still seated in the chapel. She looked up, as though shaken out of reveries.

"You have not been long," she said.

"Almost an hour," he smiled. "You have been dreaming, like Santa Rosalia. Has she been converting you to Catholicism? After all, if one must deceive oneself, I think I'd choose the Church of Rome in preference to Protestantism, that is as superstitious, and not even lovely in its art and music. Besides, the feminine side of Romanism is poetic. Its elevation of maternity is what gives it such a hold on women."

"I think that women would have elevated motherhood, any way," she returned.

The dignity of her tone made him glance inquiringly at her: and he understood what had been absorbing

her during his absence. For the first time Monica's approaching motherhood presented itself to him as something more than an unwelcome fact. He had not very strong paternal instincts, at least, they had hardly yet been awakened in him. He realized how different were Monica's feelings, how much it meant to her.

It brought him self-reproach over his irresponsibility. He had considered marriage, somehow, as always just a matter of Monica and himself. The deepness of her look had a tinge of sadness, he thought, and he wondered whence it sprang, just what her meditations were; yet he could not bring himself to ask. Reserve wrapped her about in shadows like those investing the chapel where she sat. It was one of the times when it came to him how the nearest of relations had its separating veils. Would he ever know her truly?

On their way back to Palermo his mind was occupied by the new sentiments evoked in him. Yes, he was far too self-centred. The year had been one of personal gratification, of idle enjoyment. But all that must end. He could not go on drifting, marriage had raised up issues that had to be met. It was he, not Monica, who ought to do the planning. No doubt she had been thinking of the future, all it held for them both, during the hour she had sat in Santa Rosalia's chapel. She had been thinking—thinking of life and its problems. Was she secretly unhappy? Something in her expression had fallen on him like

a rebuke. If only Monica were less perfect. . . . It would be a relief in some ways; it would make things so much less difficult for them both.

Twilight slowly sank as they continued their winding descent to the plain. The moment was a solvent of all things earthly, fusing everything into a marvellous vision of colour and softness. The beauty of the picture made Harding's senses ache. As long as life could so enrich, it compensated for the tangles and ironies. He would seek his motive for living in beauty, as Monica found hers in moral obligation. . . .

They were half-way down the road when Harding paused.

"Listen," he said, "an idyll of Theocritus."

From the heights above, where the jagged cliffs caught the sunset glow, came a tinkling of innumerable bells, pierced by gruff cries that strangely stirred the wistful twilight.

The goatherds of Monte Pellegrino were driving their flocks down from the bleak upper pasturage. The mountain-side, which during the afternoon had seemed barren of life, was suddenly alive. Hundreds of goats—yellow, white, dun-coloured—shepherded by their guardians in pagan-like sheepskins, came leaping like a cascade from boulder to boulder. The clamour of copper bells grew deafening as the flocks approached. At length they flooded the causeway, while some of the goats, mounting the dizzy parapets, ran along them with frolicsome, sure-footed ease.

They brought with them sharp, acrid odours and

clouds of dust, as they inundated the angle of the road where the travellers had paused. Monica's sober beast, that had submitted with saintly patience to its master's goadings, was jostled aside by the advance guard. It began baulking, in spite of the boy's commands and bridle jerks. As the flocks continued to crowd by the animal was thrust violently against the stone wall of the viaduct, and Monica, half unseated, was in danger of being dashed into the chasm. Harding saved her, and supported her as best he could. They waited until the riotous herds had passed, carrying the dust and clamour on to the plain.

"Are you hurt?" he exclaimed. He was trembling from the shock of her danger.

"No," she returned, attempting a reassuring smile. But she was pale, and he saw that the incident had unnerved her.

It evoked tenderness in him. Suppose she had been taken from him before he had proved that her faith in him was not misplaced.

They took no more long excursions after that. For several days Monica kept to her room, and when she reappeared she was languid and disinclined to talk. Harding redoubled in his attentions, brought Monica flowers, read to her, or talked in a cheerful, confident strain as they took short drives or walked or sat in the public gardens. But the thought of the child lay like a shadow in his thoughts. He longed to have their life go on as it had been.

He reproached himself now for not having proposed

their return to Paris, where Monica might have been under her mother's roof. But it seemed too late; the journey was long, Paris still under its winter blight. He asked if she would like him to send for Mrs. Eversley, but she negatived the suggestion. He could conceive of her mother being too selfish, too "invalidic" to take the trip, and, after all, Mrs. Eversley would be little solace.

"Then Miss Vanderhurst?" he urged.

But she shook her head. "Why ask so much of her?" she answered. He was moved. How lonely must her girlhood have been, how schooled to independence, that she could do so well without others.

* * * * *

When the child came Harding's thoughts were all for Monica, until he noticed the doctor shaking a grave head over the little bundle whose feeble wail seemed a protest against its own being.

"A slight deformity—the right foot," said the doctor.

"Will he be lame?" Harding faltered.

The doctor nodded: "I fear so. It must have been the accident on Monte Pellegrino."

"Poor Monica!" Harding thought. And, with a guilty start, he remembered the theme he had so subtly imagined in *The Labyrinth of Life*.

CHAPTER III

THEY returned to Paris as soon as Monica and the child were able to make the journey. Harding recognized that his "wander year," as he called it, was over, and that circumstances demanded he settle down somewhere and make a home for his family; and Paris seemed the best spot. Yet it was, perhaps, less sense of responsibility as a married man than uneasiness as an author, with a future still to confirm, that brought him to this conclusion. He had met in the smoking room of the hotel, one evening, a fellow traveller, an American, who seeing his name on the *tabella*, introduced himself and spoke praisingly of *The Horns of the Altar*. "I suppose," he said, "that you will soon have another book out."

"Not for some time yet," Harding replied.

"That's the drawback to a popular hit; it sets a standard one has to live up to." The smile that accompanied the remark was a little disparaging, touched, it might be, with envy. The man was the author of several books which had received scant attention. "So you've been spending your time in Italy," he went on. "There is something insidious in the life here, don't you find? I call Italy the 'afternoon of living.' A good place to end one's days in, but bad for those with ambition left."

The conversation dwelt uncomfortably in Harding's mind, and he said to Monica: "It's time I was getting into harness again. There's no mental tonic in these Southern countries. And Paris is where I did my best work." There was a passing sadness on his face at the thought of *The Labyrinth of Life* which, in his opinion, was his one proof of real talent.

Monica's ready assent to the proposition displeased him; it seemed to suggest that privately she had long deprecated this idleness.

Although he started north with some regret, Harding, on reaching Paris, felt its old charm come over him. Yes, he was glad to be there again. The staccato beat of the cab horses on the asphalte, as they left the station for Neuilly, fell inspiringly on his ear, and he breathed with pleasure the pungent odour of dampness left by a recent April shower. The bustle and brightness of the city gave him a sense of close renewal with his age. It challenged ambition, aroused mental activities. Success meant something in a great metropolis; life was a compromise, a half defeat, lived in the relaxing surroundings of remote Rothenbourg and indolent Palermo. He talked to his wife with so much animation on the way to her mother's home—where they were to pay a visit before taking an apartment—that she was impressed by the man displayed. Julian was getting to be what she had hoped; the year of rest and change had had rewarding effect.

Mrs. Eversley received them with a graceful, semi-invalidic, but almost reproachful smile. She lay lan-

guidly on her long chair, in her Madame de Sévigné boudoir. She wished to look lovely—lovely in a fragile, convalescent way. It was sentiment that bore her up, and the fact that it happened to be one of her “good days.” The calendar had covered a good many of these during the dear truants’ long absence. She had been at Aix-les-Bains the previous summer, where many louis drawn from what was left of Monica’s fortune had gone in amusing herself at the casino tables; and having had, the past winter, Julia Vanderhurst to multiply acquaintances for her, she had enjoyed going out and receiving people in, with remarkable activity—considering the invalid she was. Her eyes, it was true, still suffered from that awful Latin name the oculist had applied to them, and she continued to prefer seeing things as they were not to seeing them as they were through disfiguring glasses; and, after all, there were worse maladies. Besides, it had not interfered with contemplating, in the cheval glass, always convenient to her couch, what seemed to her a very satisfying vision of girlish beauty.

She informed the mother-neglecting prodigals that it had been rather a lonely winter, in spite of a devoted Julia by her side, and that she had missed them sadly. She had spared the spinster—who had now gone to London—the whole knowledge of her ills: one hated to distress kind friends; and yes, she supposed she was improving under her new—and even more sympathetic—doctor; she was sure, since they were returned to cheer her up, her present little attack would soon pass.

Of course, she must do a little entertaining for them, a dinner or so; revive her afternoons. Not much—she had not the strength, alas, for much—but just enough to put them in touch with their friends again.

She consented, without much enthusiasm, to have the infant brought to her. Harding felt that she blamed him for his lack of consideration in making her a grandmother. It had been hard enough to endure the incriminating fact of a daughter.

"What a puny little thing," was her comment, after a rather casual inspection of the addition to the family. "He doesn't resemble either of you especially, does he? I wonder what sort of a child it will grow up to be."

It was what Harding himself sometimes wondered; but he had a reticence, somehow, about discussing the subject with his wife. Monica had never alluded to the poor twisted foot, which seemed to him almost a foreshadowing of a twisted nature. It was a vague theory of his that deformed minds went with deformed bodies.

Mrs. Eversley roused herself heroically to her dinner and tea giving, because, as she confided to her son-in-law, the end of the season must be made pleasant for them. It was in connection with this immolation of invalidism on the social altar that the question of the apartment came up. It was not to be thought of, she said; they were, naturally, to make their home with her.

"I thought it was all settled before you left Paris that you were to remain here," she cried reproachfully. "What should I do all alone in a great house like

this? I've just renewed the lease in expectation of your coming. Besides, you will be so much more comfortable. Monica is a dear girl, full of good domestic intentions, but inexperienced. You see, I brought her up under the idea it would never be necessary to take the control of a house in the painful, tiresome sense. . . . I mean where she would have a hundred little cares, like knowing the price of chops, for instance." It appeared that Mrs. Eversley regarded it as quite tragic to have to know the price of chops. "And then 'a modest apartment' has such a depressing sound, as though you weren't, Julian—as, of course, you are—a successful author who can count on ample means. I know there is a good deal of old-fashioned talk about beginning married life simply, and that sort of thing; but times have so changed, and we really can't afford being 'simple' any more. People expect much of us nowadays. One has to live well and entertain, or be ignored. And who can stand being ignored—I know I can't—and it would be fatal, as far as you are concerned. The world only cares to read the books of people whom the papers describe as writing in charming, tasteful studies, with a motor at the door. How can one believe in the reliability of their versions of life unless . . . well, unless there is a motor. You see, I have my Limousine; and then the background of this house. I do think it is sweet, with so many genuine things in it, and I can create you such an ideal study where no one shall disturb you; I shall see to that. Yes, I think you owe the

effect of all that to yourself, to the literary position you have achieved. Of course, I know it is really Monica. Poor, dear, earnest Monica! She *does* mean so well, but she makes her mistakes, alas! And it would be such a mistake to listen to her . . . burying yourself in some out-of-the-way quarter of town and giving the impression you're both half starving."

She was very smiling and sweet; but, under her words, Harding felt was the implication that, unless he could keep up appearances, as she had described them, he had misrepresented his ability to give Monica the comforts he owed her.

And, indeed, the Neuilly house flattered his growing taste for luxury and fastidiousness in regard to surroundings. He had his American sentiments about independence, but it did seem an unnecessary protest to exchange Mrs. Eversley's ample and beautiful home for an apartment; and in the conversation that followed Mrs. Eversley conceded that, of course, he might contribute his share in the expenses of the common *ménage*—since it would so ease his pride—although she let him infer that it would not be much, that she meant to be more than generous over it all. Her air was one of playful allowance of his man's sentiments.

She might well be generous, he reflected, remembering Monica's temporary renunciation of her fortune. He might have thought his wife foolishly generous, but it had left him no great feeling of disappointment. In a way he, too, was careless about money matters

as long as he had enough in his pocket. He was glad, however, to remember that Monica had a fortune, even if she did not enjoy it during her mother's lifetime. It protected her in case of misfortune to himself; was ample protection, judging from what Mrs. Eversley could do on the income. The self-sacrificing act—when he recalled it—modified his feeling that Monica was rather hard and indifferent in her filial sentiments.

When he spoke to her of Mrs. Eversley's proposal, she looked disappointed, but did not oppose it beyond suggesting that, as by his own confession, he was not well off, the expense attached to the arrangement might prove awkward.

"Oh, as to that," he returned, "I am quite able to meet my share. But, of course, we'll take an apartment, if you prefer." His sensitiveness was aroused by what appeared to be a reflection on his spirit of independence. "I was only thinking you might be more comfortable here. However, we'll look up apartments to-morrow," he added.

But there was a tea next day that Mrs. Eversley particularly wanted him to escort her to: a tea where he would meet some interesting artistic personalities like himself, as she flatteringly put it. Monica declined to go, on the ground that she cared little for such functions.

"Poor Monica," was her mother's comment. "I fear she is determined to be one of those dull, domestic wives. It is a pity, Julian; you really oughtn't to

let her. A dull wife tempts a man to be a gay husband."

She looked at him rather archly; it was pleasant to be going about again with a young man who was not a bad substitute for Percy. If it was easy for her to forget that her daughter existed, it required no strain at all to forget that Julian was her son-in-law. She had on a lovely new toilette—it was a mere incident that it had not been paid for yet. It was all part of her sweet, girlish irresponsibility, for she *was* a girl yet, she told herself, as she glanced (without glasses on, of course) in the hall mirror. Yes, she felt quite vernal, like the May weather, in starting forth with dear Julian, even if there could be no holding hands any more in the little salon.

Harding was a bit annoyed at Monica's refusal to accompany them, although the child was so young and frail that it seemed natural for a mother to remain with it. But he was not thinking of that. He was wondering if Monica hadn't more sensitiveness about the family scandal than she admitted. This explanation, he felt, might suggest itself to people who knew the story and never met her in society. Pride almost seemed to demand her going out to negate the idea. It was part of his respect for her that he believed she could rise above it in this connection as he had in marrying her.

Yet he kissed her devotedly enough on parting from her.

CHAPTER IV

ONE June morning Harding was out in the Bois. He needed exercise and fresh air; he was worried by his slowness in constructing a plot. It must be a bright, optimistic story, dedicated to his wife—but, somehow, the prospect of such a theme did not fire him with enthusiasm. There was certainly much suggestion of cheerfulness in his surroundings; the house was cheerful, Mrs. Eversley was cheerful, the Clodion Psyche was cheerful; but such outward indications could not suffice where the quality lacked in himself. Art was to him not only a question of “cheerfulness”: the dramatic element was always required to stir him, and the all-pleasant, with its inevitable buffoonery, failed to interest him even casually as a reader, so he could not approach it as a creator.

Worried as he was by this condition of his thoughts, material complications disturbed him, which he might have set aside had he been absorbed in work that really appealed to him. The charming study that Mrs. Eversley had arranged as a refuge for family authorship had taken some time to fit up; she kept having new inspirations as to its furnishing. Then he had to look up Nicolls and other friends. There had been dinners and late receptions, too, that had left him out of trim for work next day. There was the habit

of a year's idleness to overcome. He missed the familiar conditions of his little room on the quay, and missed, too, the self-isolation which had been possible there. Apart from the necessity of sharing his life with others, he could not even consider himself at home in his mother-in-law's house. He was still there in the position of a guest—and a "paying guest," at that. The promised talk between Mrs. Eversley and himself about expenses had never taken place. She had set it aside with the air of one generously ignoring a trifle. During the month, however, sundry large housekeeping bills had been presented; and he, being appealed to by the servants, had paid impatiently rather than expose himself to the indignity of dunning. Mrs. Eversley on these occasions had always been lying down, or just going out, or unable to find her cheque-book; and—after he had paid—she would invariably say in a tone of gentle reproof: "Oh, but why did you do it?" Then, a few days later, when she could decently appear to have forgotten the incident, she would make a dainty allusion to the "little business talk we must have the very first time I feel strong enough." Meanwhile Harding's bank-account was growing more invalidic week by week, and he felt the real urgency of getting on with his book. Yes, he certainly ought to be "cheerful"; but he certainly wasn't.

As he paced along the Avenue des Acacias, in all its gala sweetness of flower, a Limousine stopped on the road beside, and he recognized a familiar, fresh-

coloured face at the lowered pane. He knew, by Miss Vanderhurst's letters, that Buttercup's marriage to Percy Colston had taken place shortly after his departure from Paris the previous June; and that the two occupied a house in the Avenue du Bois de Boulogne, the palatial splendours of which advertised the triumph of tea as a wealth-conductor if a nerve-destroyer. Harding had once or twice wondered why he had not met the poet and his bride at the various entertainments he had attended; it was mere chance, no doubt, for Buttercup, he was aware, had pursued ardently the social path opened by her marriage.

He had not settled in his mind how he would greet her, but was saved embarrassment on that score by Buttercup's frank pleasure at seeing him. "There," she said, as he shook hands, "I was expecting this. Get into the machine, and we'll go drive as far as the Cascades. I am out for an airing, and I see you are; so we might as well take it together. Besides, there are all sorts of things to talk over, you know."

She seemed wholly to assume that their misunderstanding at the Opéra Ball was forgotten; evidently she herself had forgotten it. And, indeed, it was hardly cause for lifelong coldness; if she had been rather malicious in telling him of the Eversleys' ancestry, he had in great measure provoked it. The quarrel lay, after all, between Percy Colston and himself; Colston had bred all the mischief.

"Well, so we both have been married a year," she said, when he had seated himself beside her. "Quite

time we were comparing notes, don't you agree?" And she laughed, as though she took matrimony lightly and concluded he did.

The laugh was not quite the old one, it struck him; there was a new note in it. It accorded with a good deal else that seemed new about Buttercup. Harding was impressed, almost surprised, at the transformation which a year had made in Hiram Baxter's daughter. She had acquired quite the air of a young woman of fashion. There was tone, sophistication, about her, and it suited her riper beauty; her clothes had a knowing *chic*, and her voice had been put out to school—it was modified, almost elegant in its intonations. As he met her eyes—for she was studying him with frank interest—he had the sense of even greater differences under all this easy adaptation to Parisian standards of looks and dress. There were clouded depths, like a clear pool that had been stirred, half revealing things which, no doubt, had been there always, in abeyance. Harding had not found her eyes particularly interesting before; but they interested him now. First, youth was gone; it was no longer girlhood that guessed about life, it was womanhood that knew. There was about Mrs. Percy Colston consciousness of her physical attraction, of the subtler uses that could be made of it. It was more than a revelation, it came as a shock; Buttercup's old candid heartiness had pleased him, had compensated for her crudities. Mrs. Percy Colston was certainly no longer crude; she seemed, on the contrary, fairly far on the

road to becoming over-civilized. He wondered how much "Percy" was responsible for the accent which he vaguely divined in her. It caused a passing twinge of conscience, for he still nursed the flattering idea that his treatment of Buttercup had precipitated the foolish marriage. No wonder Buttercup laughed about her matrimonial whim. But he was glad that she could laugh.

"Yes," she said, "I have been quite looking forward to seeing you. Somebody told me—I forget who, one meets so many people—that you and your wife were in Paris. At least, my informant *supposed* it was both, though you are reported to go out alone, or, rather, with Mrs. Eversley hovering like a guardian angel. Now, don't grow cross. Can't an old friend tease you? And I am that, I hope. But why do you look at me so? Do you think I have changed? But you've changed, too."

"Have I?" and his laugh was meant to match her own. "In what way?"

"Oh, it's being married, I suppose. But the changes in us don't mean we've got to change to each other. I always let Percy manage his own feuds, so I don't see why we should have any Montague and Capulet feelings." Again she laughed, perhaps enjoying all the remark suggested. She added: "With the sentiment left out, of course. Just a friendly alliance, you know, between picked members of the hostile houses of Eversley and Colston. Why not?"

"Why not, indeed?" He thought she showed more

skill in talking. He could well believe it was her husband. He recalled Nicolls's remark that Buttercup, with half a chance, would soak up culture as blotting-paper does ink. He went on, feeling some response due to her challenging air: "We couldn't be anything but friends."

"Yes, so it seemed," she returned dryly, seizing on the unintended ambiguity of his assurance. "Though I took you rather seriously in the beginning. You flirted with me outrageously—you know you did. I was silly; but I'm not sure even now that it was quite fair of you. But, there, if we speak of that, we may fall to quarrelling. And, as I say, I leave quarrelling to Percy. It's his speciality."

"It's just as well not to revive all that. Though it gives me the chance to apologize for having been rude at the Opéra that night."

"Oh, I've forgiven that, and everything else," she affirmed. And again her eyes met his. "You see, I have to cultivate a good temper. Nobody could live with Percy who didn't. Oh, don't think from that," she added, guessing his thought, "that we don't get on. We do." And this time her laugh was slightly hard. "We understand each other—and that's a great deal in this life, you know."

She hesitated for a moment, caressing her Pomeranian, whose bright ribbon matched her gown. It was part of a studied harmony about her, and expressed an acquired elegance of life. The completeness of little luxurious accessories in the Limousine suggested

that she must spend most of her days in it; he noticed particularly a silver cigarette case. When he knew her, she had not smoked.

"Papa, as you can imagine, did not take to Percy much," Buttercup began again, her conversation flowing with something of the old spontaneity. "But, then, he was deadly afraid I would fall in love with a foreigner. The worst American, to his mind, is better than the best European." Again her laugh came—the new moderated laugh that told him so much. "Then I enjoy living in Paris. Society's so new to me—Paris society, I mean," she corrected hastily. "Of course, I'm on the go the whole time. Now tell me about yourself—it's your turn. You've become quite a man of the world, haven't you? You've given up being an author, any way; I never see anything of yours. I still have your *Adonis-Garden*—with its dedication. Don't you write verses any more? And is it because life's all prose, no poetry?"

"If life were ever anything else but prose, there would be no need of poets trying to say it isn't," he returned. "As to telling about myself, I don't know there's anything to tell. I'm writing, but slowly; and I go out—slowly, too."

"I don't wonder you look slow, then," she commented. "But it's not for me to criticize; if you sound prosaic, why, I do, too. Your wife's quite handsome, I'm told. I know she doesn't go out, so I won't suggest calling."

"She is rather domestic," Harding suggested.

"And you?" Buttercup demanded.

"Oh, I'm not ideally so. I don't particularly care for Society, but I'm not crazy about always staying at home, either."

"Then you'll have to come to my afternoons. We'll probably be meeting all the time, any way. I shouldn't like to make Mrs. Harding jealous, though, since she doesn't go about with you."

"Oh, she's never jealous."

"Really? How fond she must be of you, then! Percy feels quite safe about me, too. He doesn't have to break any of the Sèvres china papa gave us."

Then, as though personalities had lasted long enough, she drifted to general subjects.

When Harding parted from Buttercup, he promised to come to her next "At home."

And, indeed, he asked himself: Why not?

* * * * *

Harding would have expected to be angry when he first met Percy Colston; but rancour, at the end of a year, is apt to stale. The two came face to face in front of the Ritz one day shortly after Harding's drive with Buttercup. Colston's manner was disarming; and, besides, when Harding, with characteristic directness, brought up the question of *The Labyrinth of Life*, he found himself in an untenable position through the poet's positive denial of any responsibility in regard to it:

"Why, my dear fellow, what had I to do with your writing that story? I don't encourage other people

to write novels. Novels are middle-class art. I should blush to have done one myself. In fact, I always say: Don't! to people who have the vulgar mania. I don't say a plot never crops up in my mind—all sorts of odious things will happen to a man. But if I moan it out in my misery, and you snap it up, thinking it's a good thing, don't cast reflections on my character, but keep a sharp lookout for your own. You are as ungrateful and as impossible as Fernet and Circour, who are always stealing my ideas and then nursing sore heads afterwards. But, at least, they steal ideas, and you come nosing around in the backyard with notions I'd be ashamed to own. Really, you are the limit—er—er—as Hiram Baxter would say, of course, because, as you know, I *never* use slang.

"Still, you might have told me the truth," Harding said.

"When I'd promised Mrs. Eversley not to? She was always fussing about it, as though a family crime was the only thing to lend importance to a woman."

Harding had invited him into the Ritz, but he indignantly refused tea.

"I've had enough tea to last me for the rest of my life. My system is poisoned with tannin. I haven't seen you, have I, since Buttercup and I got married? Well, then, of course, you can't understand how Surpassing Ceylon has got on my nerves. You see, it was the name of Baxter that induced me to say 'yes' when Buttercup was offered. I thought of Baxter's

Saint's Rest, which was grateful to one as tired of the world as I am. I said it would be a rest for me. But, then, I hadn't seen Hiram and his sideburns. I couldn't—how could I?—have conceived of anything so awful. I thought Nature, when she had invented Miss Zenobia, had committed her worst. Those two weeks in America have left me in a state of nervous prostration from which I shall never recover. Chicot was as much affected as I. He wanted to warn me, the poor little creature; he jangled his bells as much as to tell me if I married into such a dreadful ambient, it would be jangle for the rest of my life.

"Yes, as I say, how was I to know you were going to marry Monica Eversley? It no more occurred to me than that I was going to marry Buttercup. That's the interesting thing about life. It keeps you guessing what is going to happen. Buttercup took me so by surprise that I said I would, when I meant I wouldn't. She proposed so crudely—it was the night of that Opéra ball—that I was rather charmed. I had begun to despair of her remaining elementary—it was what took my fancy, you remember—and it revived my hopes of her. But how she has disappointed me! You'd hardly know her for the same girl. She's sickeningly grammatical, like everybody else. As I tell her, if only she would be unsyntactical again. But she won't, she hardly ever commits a solecism. She has absolutely no conception of the value of being vulgar. In fact, Buttercup is almost a lady now, I fear." And he sighed wearily.

"Don't be hard on Mrs. Perdoe," he continued, as he sipped vermouth, "for making away with objectionable persons. I wish she were alive to exercise her beautiful art upon Hiram Baxter. I hate the name of tea. I never take a cup that I don't read my fate in the leaves at the bottom."

Harding interrupted him to say that Mrs. Perdoe had only been charged, not convicted, of criminal acts. The poet seemed to think that rather robbed the scandal of interest.

"And what, by the way, became of the book?" he asked. "I don't seem to have heard that it was published."

"Of course it wasn't," Harding said angrily. "Do you suppose I'd publish it under the circumstances?"

"What circumstances?" returned the poet. "The American public, you mean? No, I don't suppose it *would* have pleased the Miss Zenobias, found favour with clerks on their way to suburban homes, Maine school-mistresses, women with no thoughts above servants and Sunday roasts. It wouldn't have been talked about at afternoon teas and mothers' meetings. It didn't dilute truth with a pint of rose-water; it hadn't any kitchen-hall humour. In a word, it was Art, and you feared if you were artistic, you'd lose your popularity. My dear fellow, I warned you against the camp of the Philistines. But I see it was no use. You've given yourself over, hand and foot, to Mammon and all mercantile unrighteousness."

"I haven't given myself to anything," said Harding, thinking of his manuscript scarcely begun. "I seem to have lost the knack of writing."

"Ah—no wonder! Art knocked at your door, and you turned her away. Besides, you oughtn't to have married. Marriage is the champion of 'the world and what it fears.' In brief, you've become too respectable. An artist should never be respectable. Once you belonged, or might have belonged, to literature. Now, my dear fellow, you belong to your wife. And, you know, the sacred fire was meant for altars, not for hearthstones. There's too little draught on a hearthstone." Percy liked to pose as a hearthstone breaker, though really not man enough to try it.

Harding recalled to him the fact that he was married himself.

"Yes, I suppose so, but I'm married as little as possible," the poet qualified. "Buttercup and I agreed to be sensible about it; it's the only time we ever did agree as to what was common-sense. Yes, it's 'agreement *à la mode*' with us. Buttercup, you know, isn't particular, so long as she knows she's fashionable."

Harding felt sorry for Buttercup as he left Colston. He had repented of his promise to call, and would probably not have gone, if it had not been for that meeting at the Ritz. As it was, however, he went. She received him heartily, and, while there was no opportunity for any real conversation, he enjoyed the visit. He did not mention it to Monica; why should he not

see his friends? He had the right to liberty of action. And right to liberty of Art, too.

Although he felt Colston was posing as usual, their talk had left him with a sense of profound discouragement. Marriage was not, he mused, conducive to literary glow; it was forcing him, for the sake of his wife, for the sake of money, for the sake of "respectability," to write in a vein of insincerity. A number of vague ideas had occurred to him, and every one that he liked seemed to lack the "wholesome" note that he knew Monica expected, as demonstrating his "reform"; and he truly desired to please her, while not renouncing the hope to please his Art-self simultaneously. He had not succeeded. He dreaded any more *Labyrinth of Life* issues. Yet he did not want to return to the smug fashion of *The Horns of the Altar*. Smug was the word he applied after re-reading the book to which he owed his position. No wonder it had sold, for it had none of the awkwardness, the alienating effect of real Art. The book chilled him by its commonplaceness, its authenticated sentiments, and, mentally, he compared it with the manuscript he had sacrificed for Monica; the only thing he had done that was really artistic. As he thought of it, cast aside, a smothered resentment rose in him. Though he did not suspect the fact, from that day reflections upon past mistakes held a more important place in his thought than the speculations as to a new plot to which he sincerely believed he was devoting himself.

Mrs. Eversley leased a villa at Trouville for that summer; her health really required it, she said, and also little Julian's health—it was the first time she had taken thought of the child. Harding accepted the arrangement not unwillingly, believing it would be bracing to write by the sea; more experienced authors might have told him the task would be a well-nigh hopeless one. When they returned to Paris after a summer of expense so great that he felt he must positively force the issue of finances with Mrs. Eversley, or else announce to her that he and Monica must make other less expensive arrangements—his book was still where it had been that spring: sometimes in the clouds, sometimes in the poetic sighing of the sea, sometimes in the rings of his cigar smoke, but most times nowhere at all.

CHAPTER V

HARDING found it difficult to secure an interview with Mrs. Eversley, in spite of his resolve to force one. He suspected that she was trying to elude him, for he had dropped enough hints—as a kind of mental clearing of the throat—to put her on her guard. It became a case of a hunter tracking a wary bird already acquainted with the gun. He preferred not to have the talk take place in Monica's presence, and he seldom saw Mrs. Eversley alone, and then at most inauspicious moments. That her condition of health since their return was really serious was privately made known to him and Monica by the doctor, who hinted that, in addition to other complications, Mrs. Eversley's use of cosmetics had affected her blood. Yet she went out more than ever, as though social amusement helped to dull her anxiety. That she worried about herself—or about something—became evident enough. The ravages were only superficially disguised by a visit to the Institut de Beauté, from which she emerged glowing like a Dead Sea apple. In spite of his growing impatience with her, Harding was moved by these struggles of hers against age and malady. She spent her mornings in her room, where, too, she frequently had her luncheon served, and it was a kind of barricade he could scarcely break

through. She had to have a great deal of repose, it seemed, and the dear sympathetic doctor—as she pointedly informed her son-in-law—had particularly warned her against the effects of agitation. The rest of the time was consumed in hastening to teas or dinners, from which she returned “so tired” that it appeared almost brutal to engage her in a serious business talk.

She never asked him to accompany her out now, and it appeared in line with her policy of avoidance. Yet another reason was supplied him by Buttercup, whom he met by chance one day shortly after his return to Paris. She told him, with some amusement, that Mrs. Eversley and Percy had patched up their quarrel, and she was quite jealous of the flirtation between them. She said it with a laugh which told him how indifferent she was over rivals in Percy’s favour. Harding, on his way home after this meeting, wondered how much Monica shared Buttercup’s equanimity on the subject of husbands’ attentions to other women. He did not think Monica jealous, as, indeed, she had little reason to be; but about her had gathered the atmosphere of marital neglect. It showed itself in a slight increase of dignity with him, in less responsiveness to his kiss—a little perfunctory at times, for his mind was preoccupied. Her manner seemed to imply, too, he said to himself, that she held he wasted his days, and, half convinced this was so, he accepted few invitations. It had been, in great measure, Mrs. Eversley who had fostered his taste for society. Going

out had tended to flatter his vanity. As much as he personally condemned *The Horns of the Altar*, it pleased him to have people praise his work; it picked up his flagging belief in his talents. But such complimentary allusions to the book were generally accompanied by a question when a new novel was to appear. The query had the effect of casting gloom on his spirit for hours afterwards.

Reacting from this mood one afternoon, he lost patience with Mrs. Eversley's evasions, and determinedly rapped at her boudoir door.

Mrs. Eversley was at her desk, evidently waiting to go out. She was glancing over a little note-book, in which she had jotted down stray remarks of people to serve as conversational aids. Most of them were old sayings of Percy's; some were Harding's, although there were fewer of these. They pleased her less—they hadn't Percy's dear, delightful sparkle; and, indeed, Julian's recent sayings she considered not worth using at all. Marriage had certainly made him dull, she often reflected. His inability to furnish her with effective little speeches was one thing she had against him these days.

She smiled, forcedly he thought, on seeing him enter; but she calmly replaced her note-book in the desk drawer, remarking:

"Oh, it's you, Julian? I was just looking over my engagements for the afternoon, and I find if I don't get off at once, I sha'n't manage half I have on hand. Be a dear, and see if the motor's ready. I've rung

three times for Simone—I can't imagine what has become of her. What a bore these teas are, but people are so sensitive if one doesn't turn up." And she sighed as she rose, and, taking up her hat, moved to the mirror. Her air was that of a fond mother-in-law who supposed he had stepped in for a casual, ill-timed chat or to borrow something to read. She always had the latest novels to skim through.

"But it is only a little after three," he answered, "and the motor hasn't come yet. So I wonder if you can't spare me a few moments—"

She interrupted him. "But I *said* three. I hadn't any idea it was so late. What tiresome creatures servants are—they don't pay the least attention to orders. Simone is the worst of all, never about and always grumbling. It really is too hard on me, in my state of health, to have to endure their carelessness. Nobody has any consideration." And with another more pathetic sigh, she pressed the button to summon her maid, as if to show how discourteous it was of him not to do her bidding.

But he had no intention of being thus lightly dismissed to-day.

"There must have been some mistake," he observed. "I asked downstairs when you were going out, and was told the motor had been ordered for four. So, as you will have to wait a little while any way, you can surely give me a moment or so. It is a matter of considerable importance to me, or I should not bother

you. You know, I tried to see you earlier, but Simone said you were dressing."

"Of course, I could hardly go out otherwise." And her small, vexed laugh concealed some nervousness. Her voice had grown a good deal—was almost out of its teens—since Julian had become one of the family. He had less reason to find its sweetness cloying. "And 'a matter of importance'! That sounds so depressing. Really, Julian," and, mastering herself, she put on an air of playful reproach, "I do think you might spare me such an ordeal to-day—when I'm feeling particularly badly. It won't leave me strength for anything. Can't you wait until I have one of my good days. Sometimes I think you and Monica don't quite realize what an invalid I am."

"Yes, I know you're not well," he said, yielding to his feeling of annoyance, "still, if you have strength for teas this afternoon, I should think you might bear a short business talk. It's about our staying on with you. It is pleasant for us, of course; but you and I have never come to an arrangement about it. I'm sorry to trouble you, but I simply must know where we stand."

"But I can't tell you such things offhand," she returned languidly. "I have such a poor head for figures. And I have assured you all along that I consider you and Monica my guests, that you should look on the house as your home. I love to have you with me, and it all costs me so little"—as indeed it had

the last year—"living the way we do. It would hurt me somehow to put it on the horrid, formal basis you propose. If it eases your foolish pride, Julian, why just pay a trifling bill now and then when my cheque-book isn't at hand, or I am out, or something like that. Cut-and-dried business arrangements are such a bore."

As she spoke she contemplated her image in the cheval glass, a hatpin in one hand, while searching the proper spot to pierce her new Virot creation. She was wondering if Percy would approve of her costume—he had such critical taste. He had promised to be at one of the teas she was going to, and it was her main reason for venturing out that afternoon, for she really felt quite ill. She knew she looked it—that her eyes were dull—indeed, they were so dim that, to study herself, she had to stand quite close to the mirror, and even then the effect was rather blurred.

"It is extremely kind of you to put it that way," Harding returned, "but it isn't fair to you. As to paying a bill now and then"—and his tone was a little sarcastic over her slighting dismissal of those he had settled—"I have met a number so far. It amounts to a good many thousand francs, as you will see," and he drew out a slip of paper on which he had made a list of them. "Far more, in fact, than I can afford."

"But why have you done it? I'm sure I never asked you to," she said indifferently.

"No, perhaps not. But I preferred to do so rather than be annoyed by constant dunning. I'm sorry,

but the state of my bank account won't permit of matters remaining like this. To be plain, I have almost kept the establishment going, and, besides, have settled many of your personal accounts."

"It isn't true!" she cried with hastily assumed haughtiness. "It seems to me I'm always paying some stupid bill or other. And if you *would* settle my accounts now and then—with your silly American notions about not keeping awful tradespeople waiting, as everybody does in Europe—it isn't very nice of you to cast it at me like this. And I've tried my best to be nice to you, to make you feel at home, and—and been most generous in fact—I don't think you appreciate all I have done." She was losing her temper, which did not often happen to her, but she clung to her habitual fictions as if they were facts. Perhaps she would not have brought issues to this point, for it was not clever, if she had not been nervously unstrung; her heart troubled her. There was an unpleasant numbness—which came more and more often now—as though her circulation were arrested.

But Harding's own nerves were none of the best, and his temper met the slight flare of her own. "I haven't said that you have not been generous," he answered. "I only speak of the accounts because it is right that they should be cleared up. I am not a rich man, and I have to take some thought for the future."

"But you must have enough to live on," she exclaimed agitatedly. "It was, of course, what I sup-

posed—what you gave me to understand—when you proposed to my daughter. You don't mean, then, that you are *poor*, that Monica has married a man who can't support her? It *isn't* true—it can't be true—that you haven't any money, with your book and all that. Authors make thousands and thousands out of writing these days; I know they do. And Julia Vanderhurst told me you were successful, and Madame de Kansa prophesied how remunerative your work would be . . . or that was what you *pretended* she said. If it isn't so, and you have deceived us all, you are nothing more than a fortune-hunter. But I don't believe you. It's just that you are miserly, love money, like all Americans, and begrudge the little you have spent while here. I should think you'd be ashamed to mention those trifling bills!" And she regarded him, struggling with her hysterical tears that meant ruin to a brand-new complexion, bought especially dear, since it exceeded the number of enamellings which science pronounced safe. She considered herself insulted, and it quite warranted, she felt, the cutting reply.

"I haven't said I couldn't support my family," he returned with a flush. "Although we may differ about what is proper support. As to being a fortune-hunter, it seems to me facts dispose of any such accusation. I knew before I married Monica that she had nothing, and that she had renounced such fortune as she possessed. Who is enjoying the income that belongs to her by her father's will?"

Mrs. Eversley pressed her hands to her heart—partly as dramatic resort—but she experienced a strange sensation there: “You are killing me,” she cried; “you have no right to come to my room and behave in this cruel way. I’ll have Monica here to protect me against you.” And, wildly pressing the bell, she ordered Simone—whose prompt appearance suggested that she had been standing outside—to tell her daughter to come at once. Then her strength failing her, she sank on the couch without regard for her Virot hat.

She broke into sobs as Monica entered the boudoir. Monica paused a moment in surprise to regard the two, then went to her mother. “What is the matter?” she inquired with marked concern.

“Julian has been making a scene,” her mother breathed hysterically. “He has attacked me outrageously, and wants the money you let me have for my little comforts. He has shown no consideration for me. I am ill, ill over it all. He *knows* I am ill, yet he hasn’t spared me,” and she clung to her daughter, who was bending over her trying to soothe her.

“But Julian quite understands that,” Monica said. “I told him about the arrangement I had made with you. You might see, Julian, that my mother isn’t in a condition to have painful talks. It would have been better, wouldn’t it, if you had discussed the subject with me, instead.”

She looked rather reproachfully at him, for, judging from her mother’s collapse, he had not been quite

considerate; he knew that the doctor had warned them against the effect of agitation. She had grown more tender to Mrs. Eversley since learning of her precarious state of health. Harding thought his wife unjust towards him.

"My only reason for coming here," he answered, "was to ask for a settlement of our accounts. It was really necessary that I should." Distaste held him from saying more.

"My heart is troubling me so!" moaned Mrs. Eversley like a stricken ringdove. Monica and Simone helped her to bed, and they gave her a dose of the medicine which the "sympathetic" doctor—perhaps he had more sympathy than conscience—had left to be used in such emergencies. After an hour her hysteria subsided, and the crisis being thus happily weathered, she remained alone, having dispatched Monica to write some twenty notes and Harding to give some forty telephone calls.

In the middle of the night Mrs. Eversley suddenly awoke. She had had a nightmare about her eyes: she wanted light, light, all the light possible. It seemed to her terrified nerves that even the little night-lamp on her table glowed dimly. Stretching out her hand, she turned the electric switch. Even then the room did not appear as bright as usual. She sat up in bed, shivering with fear. Suppose she were going blind? The very thought iced the blood in her veins. How could she judge, how measure her misfortune, thus alone in the night? She slipped

weakly out of bed and tottered towards her mirror, instinctively seeking a glimpse of the object she knew best and loved best in all the world. Whatever else had been false, it had remained true—to its own standards. But how horrible she looked! Literally a ghost of herself! She was old and ugly—ah, but she was undressed!

She rang for Simone, and, while waiting, went to the wardrobe and got out the new dress with which she had planned to fascinate Percy Colston that afternoon. Yes, it was a lovely creation; she would surely look lovely in it. She still held the gown caressingly in her hands when Simone entered with frowning brow and towzled hair.

“Help me on with this,” Mrs. Eversley ordered.

“But, madame, it is three o’clock in the morning!” Simone protested in sleepy indignation.

“What does it matter what time it is? I want to see how I look in it.”

“This is too much, to be called out of bed in the middle of the night for no reason at all! And my wages owing for months at that! I give you my eight days’ notice, and I promise you that if my wages aren’t paid then, you’ll have to come in your new dress and settle with me before the commissary of police!” And Simone left the room, banging the door after her.

Dazed by the violence of the scene and the threat with which it had been closed, Mrs. Eversley reverted to her original thought—her dress, her appearance.

With trembling hands she struggled into the gown, and then tried to put a little order in her dishevelled hair. It was not as it should be, she knew, but she could not do better, thus ill, alone, and betrayed. Once more she approached the glass.

Why was it so misty? Was it the light—or her eyes? And she pressed her face closer.

* * * * *

They found her next morning, crouched there, her rouged lips touching their image in the glass; death had taken her while she knelt—a worshipper of herself to the last.

CHAPTER VI

THE settlement of Mrs. Eversley's affairs took a good deal of time. At the news of her demise, bills, endless bills, as it seemed to Harding, poured in. Even before the funeral, a writ on the furniture—a considerable asset—was taken out.

Of Monica's fortune, when Mrs. Eversley's debts were paid, only a few hundred pounds remained.

At the Hotel Drouot, where the Eversley sale took place, Percy Colston was one of the largest bidders. He had a sentiment about the furniture, it appeared, for it had mostly been selected on his advice.

As to Mrs. Eversley's misappropriation of her daughter's money, Harding could never bring himself to speak to Monica, after he first acquainted her with the fact. And then she had received the news in silence—that strange silence which often puzzled him and wrapped her in a dignity peculiarly her own. But her eyes had deepened with what was pain or pride, or both ; and he noticed that from this moment a new expression stamped itself on her face. Sometimes he thought the discovery had hardened her a little, though, at other times, he told himself that it was the summoning of more resolution to combat in herself this new proof of unfortunate ancestry. At all events, Monica now realized that he had been driven by absolute

necessity to that interview which had so disturbed Mrs. Eversley as to precipitate her death; and that very disturbance had been caused, not by Harding's words, but by guilt of conscience.

He was, himself, inclined to think the revelation went to confirm the ancestral theories of his book. Mrs. Eversley had, no doubt, inherited her extravagance from Mrs. Perdoe—and the latter's lack of integrity that had led at last to crime.

The Hardings took a small furnished apartment with a studio in the rue Guénégaud, a short, quiet street lying between the Boulevard St. Germain and the quays. From the rear windows they had a picturesque view of the older, unfashionable Paris, and the few things saved from the sale of Mrs. Eversley's belongings helped to give their home a comfortable, attractive air. It was far from the Etoile district, where most of their acquaintance dwelt, and the abode was modest compared with the Neuilly background. It left a good deal for the world to surmise as to his changed fortune, and Harding, after enjoying the reputation of successful authorship, felt somewhat sensitive at the difference. But he had abandoned social ambitions by this time. He had discovered that Americans in Paris talk about books, and borrow books, and subscribe for library books, but never buy books, so that his social activities were not commercially worth to him the price of his cabs.

He revived his former intimacy with Nicolls whom, since his marriage, he had seen less often. The English-

man had called rarely at Neuilly; for he had no great liking for Mrs. Eversley and her set; but he yielded now to his friend's pressing invitations and gradually fell into the habit of dropping in frequently of an evening or informally for dinner. He was an agreeable talker and brought with him an atmosphere of outside interests that relieved Harding's life of some of its present dullness.

When Elsie Fitzgerald was at the house, too, they had unusually pleasant musical evenings. Harding fancied that mutual attachment would come of the Englishman's contacts with the Irish girl, for she was bright and attractive, and Nicolls good-looking, gentlemanly, and in the position to marry. Miss Fitzgerald, who had an engagement at the Opéra Comique, where she had scored a success in a secondary part of a new piece by Chélaré, was amiable about singing, and it was through his wife's accompaniments on the piano that Harding discovered how well Monica played. It was something of a surprise, for he had not suspected the talent in her; and it suggested a new side to her nature. The expression that passed into her face as she sat at the keyboard told him of abeyant emotions, and he asked himself, as he studied her, if he had ever called out her depths. Her love had always struck him as touched less with passion than maternal sentiment. That Monica was conscientiously trying to fill the rôle of a moral rescuer sometimes a little irritated and humiliated him. His appeal of a supposed need of her had won her to marry him;

no doubt it had flattered her woman's vanity; but he did not care to have her take it too seriously. It left him with a feeling that their relation lacked fullness, was indeed a bit prosaic.

Yet, in some respects, the change in their life brought them nearer. At Neuilly she had been a good deal under the shadow of her mother, had spent much of her time with the child, and had had no domestic responsibilities. Although she lacked housekeeping training, she showed her competence in running the apartment on a careful, economic scale. This orderliness and care in promptly meeting bills was, perhaps, her protest against her mother's extravagance, perhaps an effort to prove her character in all respects a reaction against dubious antecedents. Harding felt still that he did not wholly understand her nature, for there was always reserve about her he had never broken down. Sometimes he thought it was his own fault. At all events, he was unable to question her about many things.

As the winter came on, Harding's health troubled him a good deal; he had a bronchial attack which, with the humidity of Paris at that season, and the weakening effect of his cough, made writing difficult. Yet he had signed a contract with Bentley and Company to deliver a new manuscript for early spring, and it, as well as the looming need of money, incited him to struggle with the uncongenial novel he had finally sketched out. To keep up his strength he depended more on artificial stimulation than formerly. He had

always been an inveterate smoker—he had acquired the habit in concentrating when there was hurried copy to get down in the rush work of journalistic days—and it further irritated his lungs.

Monica showed concern about his state of health, and one day she remonstrated over his lack of care of himself. Her suggestion that he smoked too much seemed justified—his study was saturated with tobacco fumes. But he received the comment rather irritably.

“I can’t help it,” he replied. “It’s impossible to fix my mind on my work if I don’t. I’m not feeling particularly well, and it quiets my nerves. When the manuscript is off my hands I’ll give it up, perhaps, and take more rest.” And he sighed impatiently, for he was sick of what he called “Monica’s novel.” Life wasn’t just then conducive to optimistic sentiments, and the cheerful tone he was adopting in the story had its irony.

“Why not at least give yourself a few days of rest—it will freshen you for work again. You don’t look well, Julian, and it troubles me.”

“But I can’t; every day counts now. I almost wish I hadn’t made a contract with Bentley. It hangs over my head uncomfortably, the feeling that I have to get a manuscript done in a given time. Talk about the uneasy head that wears a crown. A book on the crown is ten times worse.”

“You never told me that you had signed a contract with them,” she observed. “Was it necessary to bind yourself that way?”

"Yes, because I wanted money. Hart, the junior member of the firm who did most to float the first book—you ought to have heard him describe what he called their 'street-car ads,' and other devices to thrust it down people's throats"—and his voice was sarcastic—"passed through Paris last September, and called on me. So I took the occasion to demand a thousand dollars down, to clinch the bargain between us for a next novel. Of course, if it hadn't been for that, I shouldn't have saddled myself with the contract."

She considered a moment. "If it affects your work and you feel it a burden, wouldn't it be better to return the money and free yourself?"

He laughed shortly. "Yes, perhaps, if there was any of it to return. I applied it to renting the apartment, as it happened. I doubt, anyway, that they would consent to relieve me. It isn't business, and Bentley and Company is nothing if not that." And he recalled Hart's matter-of-fact countenance and talk on the saleable side of manuscripts. He had, like Lochinvar, come out of the West, bringing with him its breezy style of doing business. It was his boast he had put life into the New York book trade.

Harding regretted the discouraged mood that had caused him to speak of his financial straits. So far he had kept it to himself, partly from pride, partly because he had wished to avoid for Monica his own anxieties about the future.

"But I think it is important that the money be returned," she replied. "You are not well, and the

contract weighs on your mind. You know I have a little money of my own still, and we can manage through my taking up enamelling again. There is always a certain demand for my work," she added. She spoke without complacence which, perhaps, might have had its excuse, for she was well known in her art, and it had always been easy to dispose of her things at flattering prices. It had been one of her sacrifices that she had abandoned her beautiful craft in marrying him.

"But I won't have it," he said with a flush. "You have enough on your shoulders as it is. Besides, the whole proposition is humiliating. I shall finish the book in time, so don't think any more about it."

"Why should it humiliate you?" she returned, earnestly. "You are run down, you need rest. The house almost cares for itself now, and I am strong. I have plenty of time for the enamelling. It is agreeable, easy work, and not a tax on the brain like writing. Your health and peace of mind are of more consequence than your pride. Send the money to Bentley, and I promise that you need have no anxiety. There are ways to recoup, if necessary. It is the proper solution, and I wish you would let me, Julian." And she laid a hand persuadingly on his arm as he sat frowning, offended, at his desk. Her voice was a little hesitating, as though she feared to offend him by seeming to parade her sense of resource. He had always had the half feeling that, in formally leaving to him the mastery of their life, there had been in her an attitude of waiting,

the consciousness of ability to face the issues of their married existence when the time should come.

"I won't hear of it," he reiterated emphatically. "There is no real reason for such drudgery being laid on you. I'm not ill—only a bit run down. It would worry me far more to think of you toiling to make ends meet, than to finish the story under pressure. So please don't speak of it again."

She lingered, with a look of disappointment on her face.

"I thought," she said, after a moment, "when you asked me to marry you, that I was to be allowed to help."

"Yes, but that isn't the kind of help I meant. I didn't propose that you were to work for us both. What I wanted most was your love." He drew her to him, and kissed her with some emotion. How generous of her to have wished it. Yet what did she think of him seriously to propose it?

The goad of this reflection caused him to throw himself in his work for the next few days with redoubled energy.

He vowed that he would get the story done by the period contracted for, no matter what the effort cost him.

CHAPTER VII

WHETHER or not Nicolls guessed the state of his affairs, Harding did not know. The Englishman came once or twice a week to the house, and seemed to take pains to be entertaining and show his friendliness. His manner implied a willingness to be of any service he could, but Harding ignored the opportunity to accept a loan of money. He had no wish to put himself under that obligation and, indeed, met it in a manner to negative the idea that he required help of any sort. There was already enough contrast between their present conditions, for Nicolls, besides enjoying health, had grown prosperous. He owned a share in the paper he edited, and he was sent on important journalistic missions that enhanced his standing in Paris and elsewhere. Harding could not question that Nicolls was a warm, sincere friend, yet he had the growing idea that his frequent visits were due to a lingering sentiment about Monica. The two were manifestly congenial, and with a renewal of their old acquaintance had grown up a sense of mutual understanding and confidence that was expressed in their air with each other rather than in any words. He sometimes wondered if any regret for the Englishman passed across Monica's heart, yet he was not jealous; and he left them together of an evening, to shut himself up in

his study, glad that his wife had someone to entertain her. The question of trusting them never even presented itself to his mind. They were both embodiments of correctness.

He went to his study a little ostentatiously, however, on some evenings when Nicolls was in, for that at least tended to remove the impression as to his neglecting work. Nicolls probably wondered why he had not brought out another story. Harding had never mentioned to him the fate of *The Labyrinth of Life*.

In spite of pressure of time, he could not overcome his fastidiousness, and he wrote and rewrote, tore up sheets, began a chapter over, until often he lost all confidence in himself. He did not see things clearly, and it was all against his own convictions about life as he had found it. He blamed himself for want of real education, the higher training that went with higher art. After all, he had spent his best years in drudgery, and all he was capable of, he sometimes told himself morosely, was work of the drudgery sort.

He was annoyed, yet relieved, one day, by receiving a letter from his publisher. It returned a cheque which had been sent by Monica, saying that the house refused to free Harding from his contract, but that they would extend the date of publication of the novel. They deprecated the delay, but, Mr. Hart added, the story would no doubt be the better for the extra time devoted to it. Harding's first impulse was to find fault with his wife for what she had done without con-

sulting him, but reflection made him judge it as an act of concern about him, and he welcomed the added months allowed for his task.

He thought he could justifiably indulge in a little rest, of which he was actually in need. He had taken scarcely any exercise, and he went out now for afternoon strolls. He encountered friends occasionally that way, and came home feeling the better for it. After all, he had been leading a dull life, and lack of social amusement, he told himself, had something to do with his lack of interest in writing. His temperament needed it—writers had to keep in touch with the world. It gave them ideas, fostered their powers of observation, increased their knowledge of character, life. Yes, he had been getting stale.

He chanced one afternoon on passing up the rue de la Paix, to meet Mrs. Percy Colston, who was issuing from her dressmaker's. He had not seen her since Mrs. Eversley's death and, indeed, he had half meant to give up the acquaintance. It was among the renunciations that his present existence seemed to impose on him, somehow. She was cordial with him, in spite of his long neglect.

"I'm done to death," she said, "getting hung with garlands like the Golden Calf. That's one of the names, by the way, that Percy has invented for me—although I can't say he does so much worshipping. Suppose we go into the Ritz and have tea. I'm half fainting for it."

Her voice was hard and strained. He wondered if it was cutters or mundane care that gave it the tired

intonation. She seemed to have changed since he last saw her—there was less than ever of the old Buttercup. Perhaps she was reacting from the life she had been leading. She had steadily climbed the Paris social ladder, as he knew from seeing her name almost daily in the papers.

“Let’s find some quieter place,” he objected. “No one can talk at the Ritz—it’s worse than a cage of cockatoos. There’s a tea-room opposite that hasn’t become the fashion yet.”

“Then let’s go there,” she agreed. “I’m getting sick of ‘fashion.’ It’s all scream and feathers, as you say. I haven’t much imagination any more—if I ever had—or I shouldn’t have proposed the other. But it’s one of the ruts one gets into.”

They went to the place Harding proposed and found a corner, fairly apart from the general clatter of tea cups.

“Why haven’t you been to see me?” she demanded, after she had talked a while, in a disillusioned way, about recent amusements and less personal things. It all implied that her life was empty and idle, and Harding experienced a touch of conscience. Her foolish marriage was responsible for it in a way, no doubt, and he was responsible for the marriage. He would have liked to help her if he could, but he saw no way; without medicine to cure his own malady of soul, he was scarcely in a position to save this girl who had, apparently, ruined her nature through ambition or whim. Colston’s reference to Buttercup that spring

had given him a glimpse into what their marriage must be.

"I go nowhere now," he answered. "We're in mourning, and then I'm working. Besides, I can't say society ever did me much good."

"It doesn't do anyone any good," she said dispiritedly. "But then, what does? I long ago gave up the idea of having any serious interests. Percy once urged me to pursue what he called the 'career of crudeness.' He proposed to me a salon celebrity by chaunting Walt Whitman, arrayed in primitive beads and feathers. It has struck me—now that I know more of Paris—that there is little need here of Whitman. It is mostly 'The Song of Adam,' I should say. Yes, I heard of Mrs. Eversley's death and of your taking a flat in town. She wasn't as rich, it appears, as people thought. I suppose that was why Percy threw her over. He has an instinct about sinking vessels. But I'm sorry for your sake, even if your marriage was such a one of sentiment. I don't know much about sentiment"—and she laughed with some bitterness—"but I fancy there must be times when it's hard to live on it exclusively."

Her tone implied, in contradiction to her words, that she conceived him disappointed in his matrimonial calculations. She had perhaps had reason to think he had approached her in rather a fortune-hunting spirit. It annoyed him, and he remarked:

"It was rather hard on my wife, of course. As for myself, I'm not certain it wasn't the best thing—I'd

probably have grown slack about work if there had been much money. One gets lazy when there's no need of earning one's bread. And writing people are a rather idle set."

"Yes, I see a good deal of them—they're fond of idling in the house. And then I've been reading Daudet's *Femmes d'Artistes*—that's rather illuminating. I suppose I ought to call myself one, granting Percy's carved cherry stones is Art. Daudet describes a good many kinds of artists, and I amused myself trying to see which of the situations described fitted your case. Oh, no, I don't read much, and then mostly French novels. I once aimed at improving my mind, and Percy seemed a road to culture. But I gave it up. In fact, I've given up pretty much everything except trying to amuse myself. Yes, as a *femme d'artiste* I can hardly be called a success." She added, after a moment, "I'm sure Mrs. Harding must make an ideal one."

He would have preferred her not to bring Monica into the conversation, it seemed bad taste; he hesitated between ignoring the remark and disposing of any assumption she might have formed as to his marriage not being satisfactory.

"Yes, she is ideal, to use your word," he replied. "She's entirely too good for me, in fact."

"Yes, I can't fancy you exactly 'ideal' yourself," she returned with a slight laugh. "I shouldn't like you as well though. One gets on better with people who have their faults. I'm human, as I needn't say,

no doubt, and I'm more at ease with others who're human also. But it's really horrid of you not to come to see me. Are you too much in love with your ideal home-life to care to keep up old friendships? Don't come, though, on my 'days,' it will only bore you. And then I really want to talk to you. A talk about old times will do me good." And she looked at him rather wistfully, as though his neglect of her had cut. Again he felt a twinge. She had risen, and, as he escorted her to her motor, he said:

"I'd certainly be glad to do you any good, even if it is only talking over old times. But I'm not much of a hand at doing anybody good, I fear."

She sighed restlessly. "I doubt, really, if anybody *can* do me any good. It's too late for it, I imagine. I don't believe in anything or anybody any more. The last year has taken it out of me somehow." Then, as she gave him her hand: "But come and try, any way."

And he left her, moved by the look in her eyes as she nodded farewell.

When he returned home he found that Monica had put her studio in working order during his absence. He had asked her to go out with him, and had been a little wounded that she had not come. That was the explanation—she had resolved to take up her enamelling again.

It gave him a mixed feeling of annoyance and pain, and that evening he shut himself in his study, although no inspiration came. It was his protest against her opposing his wishes.

Yes, as Buttercup said, she was ideal. He ought to appreciate it instead of resenting the sacrifices she was making for him.

Why did it produce the odd feeling of alienation?

She was the star to which he had hitched his wagon stuck in the mud and ruts of life. But, like stars, she was set high, and the light was cold. He wished she were a little more human, more loving, and less calm.

And he thought of the look in Buttercup's eyes as they parted.

Yes, nobody could say that Buttercup wasn't human.

He struggled with his writing for the ensuing week, and did not keep his promise of calling on Buttercup. But he remained out of sorts, and his brain felt heavy, and, even with extra red wine at dinner and a return to smoking, he seemed unable to stimulate himself to the extent of getting any decent work done. What was the matter with him, he asked himself. Had he lost all mental life, imagination, glow, in the early thirties? His old discouraged feelings about his futility, his lack of place in life, came more heavily to him. Would he go on like this, and was Monica's hand always to rest at the helm, and he remain a wreck, a mere drone, filling the odious position of a wife-supported husband? He told himself he could not endure it. Yet where was the solution?

He yielded enough to his prejudice in having Monica take up her enamelling, to sit sometimes in the studio, talking or reading to her, but it was all such a painful

reminder of dependence that gradually—reproaching himself for it—he avoided the studio or looked in only occasionally. It seemed like a wanton neglect, yet he did not feel he could draw breath freely watching her working, always working. The sight depressed him, increased his melancholy over everything!

He did not often stay out at night, but one evening he met an old New York acquaintance—a fellow journalist—who invited him to dine; and afterwards they had gone to the theatre and had had beer at a boulevard *café*. Harding seldom permitted himself such relaxation, and if he had drunk and smoked more than was prudent, considering his state of health, he had enjoyed the evening and the talk over New York days, and he came home in better spirits.

He expected to find Monica gone to bed, and he entered quietly so as not to disturb her. But he discovered that she was not in the apartment. He turned to the studio, annoyed that she should work at such an hour. She certainly overdid things, particularly in contrast with the evening he had spent.

The studio was not connected with the apartment and was at the farther end of the hall. He moved down the corridor, his tread muffled by the carpet. As he approached, a faint odour of acids greeted his sense—it suggested the atmosphere of an apothecary. The hall was in darkness, and the only light that came to him was from the studio, for the door was ajar.

He was rather curious to see what she was doing,

and it arrested his step at the threshold, as did also the picture presented to his view.

The large studio was only dimly lighted. Besides a single shaded lamp the illumination came from the open mouth of the muffler, in which Monica baked her enamels. It required a high degree of heat, and the charcoal glowed now, sending on the half dusk of the studio a play of scarlet light. It defined in red all the cracks and joinings of the small furnace like the sutures of a skull. The light emphasized the obscurity, wherein much of its simple furniture remained undefined. There was a gleam of steel tools on her working bench, the pale notes of a few plaster casts that hung against the wall. The muffler was placed in the middle of the room; and before it Monica was standing, examining something in her hands—no doubt an enamel which had recently been baked.

The sanguinary light smote her in full face, so that she was the main feature of the picture. She was in a greyish linen blouse, and her heavy black hair, drawn back from her brows, fell in a loose, long plait over one shoulder. It was like a picture by Schalcken—reminded Harding of certain old engravings he had seen. He paused, impressed, not wanting to disturb the effect by making his presence known. He noted it all, but what struck him most powerfully was the strange expression on his wife's face. Her whole aspect was different from what he was familiar with: there was something so sinister in her immobile air:

against the midnight-weighted dusk of the studio it produced almost a sense of shock.

He understood after a moment that it was the light. It fell on her features in such a way as to erase the everyday lines, remodel them. He had himself sometimes experimented in the distortion of expression produced by shifting a candle flame in front of a face. It was odd what certain shifts brought out, as though revealing secrets of the soul there, sketching all the possibilities that Nature concealed. Yet he could not have believed that the illumination falling, as it did, on his wife's face could so transform it, make it look hard, unpleasant, almost evil.

He was about to enter the studio when Monica turned from the furnace and went to one side of the room. She took from a stand there a bottle and a small pair of scales. She laid two slips of paper on the pans, and, unstopping the bottle, began carefully to pour out some white powder. It was borax, to which she resorted in baking the enamels when the heat refused sufficiently to melt the colours. The powder clung inside the bottle, and to pour it she tapped the bottom with her finger tips very lightly, just enough to have the proper portion. Then she touched the scales to set them balancing, to judge whether they were working properly. It was fine, delicate work, and Harding had never seen her at it—on the occasions he had stopped in the studio, Monica was generally busy with her brush or sketching some design.

What impressed him now was her dexterity, the curious, odd play of her long, tapering fingers. They had always attracted him, but it was more than that as he watched—it was fascination. The light reddened and elongated them, made their motions resemble some white, cruel spider. They held him by sheer force of their unpleasantness. Then the connection came back, and a shock of feeling caused the moisture to spring to his skin. He had forgotten the plaster cast of the Marquise de Brinvillier's hand in Madame de Kansa's ante-room.

Monica had the hands of a poisoner.

And with the recollection came the thought of Mrs. Perdoe. It was from her, no doubt, that Monica had got her hands. She, too, had been a poisoner. He could fancy her pouring out, in the same adept way, the fatal dose of powder, white and just enough, like that, for her victim, while the silent midnight held her.

And, with a strange sense of sickness, Harding turned and went back silently to the apartment.

When, after a little, Monica entered, he pretended to be asleep.

CHAPTER VIII

By next day the impression lost much of its force. He ridiculed himself for allowing nerves to get such a mastery of him. It was more than absurd—it insulted Monica and his love for her. She had been labouring in her studio for his sake, and, instead of being touched by it, he had yielded to morbid fancies about her. It had only been the midnight hour, the silence, the sombre shadows, the trick of light; and, seeing her next day, calm, dignified, as usual, moving about in the performance of household duties, he felt ashamed. Yet her hands continued to have a strange fascination for him as he watched her arrange in the vases the simple market flowers she brought home, or do a bundle in her neat, dexterous way. And he had to control a feeling of dislike at having her touch him.

He asked what she was doing in her studio, remaining up so late. The question was put casually, and he did not tell her that he had watched her work. He professed that annoyance at finding her employed after midnight had caused him to go to bed without waiting for her.

She brought the panel for him to see. It was a beautiful thing, representing a robed female figure groping with outstretched arms through a cloud.

“What do you call it?” he asked.

"Love in a Mist," and she indicated the border of pale, interwoven flowers of that name.

He wondered what had suggested the idea. Was she struggling in a cloud of doubt herself?

A few days later he was searching for a book in the boxes left untouched since taken out of storage. He picked up a bundle of papers which proved to be the original version of *The Labyrinth of Life*. He had by this time half forgotten the existence of this manuscript; and with some curiosity he glanced over it.

The story was a melancholy one, defiant in its exploitation of life's sombre side. But he felt it had strength, was well done; and if he had doubted a little while writing, the justice of his philosophy, he now doubted no more. Reading it in his study, his self-confidence as a writer partly returned. How unfortunate that he could not print it! It would so opportunely meet the demand of his publisher for a new book, save him from again defaulting on the contract, permit him the rest which was becoming more and more imperative. He thought that he had attached too much importance to the slight analogies that might be drawn between this case and that of Mrs. Perdoe. After all, it was not Monica's grandmother that he had portrayed, but a fiction of his own which a mere idle allusion had suggested. Monica herself had not reproached him for that; her objection had been based entirely on the idea of responsibility in Art.

Perhaps he could persuade her to treat the situation in a less tragic light.

Several days passed before he could nerve himself to broach the subject. Then he did it tentatively one evening at table.

It was a pretty, though simple dinner, in which his special predilections had been thought of. Monica, concerned over his depression, had evidently meant to flatter his likes and perhaps thereby win him to a more cheerful mood. She talked more than was her habit, and of light, distracting things. This was the most comfortable room of the apartment, and its crimson paper helped, like the fire on the hearth, to shut out the memory of the damps and chill of a Paris winter. They were accustomed to linger over the evening meal, for both liked to be there. Besides, it was the hour that they could count on being together—the rest of the day often had its separating tasks.

It was not until after dessert that Harding, who had remained preoccupied, could bring himself to mention the manuscript. He swallowed his coffee rather hastily—he had perhaps waited for its stimulating effect.

“I had to look through one of those boxes from my room on the quays,” he remarked, trying to speak casually. “And I came across that old story of mine. It has been such a long time since I wrote it that I was able to read it detachedly. And it struck me as by far the best thing I’ve attempted.”

"What old story?" she returned with a puzzled look, trying to recall the manuscripts he had mentioned to her. She was thinking it must be one of the various inchoate sketches he had occupied himself with during their travels. He had discussed so many literary ideas with her.

"Why, *The Labyrinth of Life*," he said, with more coolness than he felt. "It is the only other long story I've done, you know. I was wondering if you wouldn't like to look over it again. You might change your opinion. It would settle all that bother with Bentley for one thing."

"But—you destroyed it." Monica struggled to understand a statement which contradicted facts as she knew them. She was not a woman who hastily drew unwelcome conclusions. He had said he had destroyed the story; so, of course, he had.

"Yes, I destroyed the final, typed copy. I burned it that Christmas night when I got home. But there was the original which I had already tossed aside. I forgot it for the moment, and afterwards, when I came upon it, that ordeal of fire seemed so unnecessarily dramatic"—he recalled the phrase Nicolls had applied to him.

She did not say anything for a breath. Her little pauses before replying, where their talk was on any subject of importance, gave value to her speech. They stamped her words as distinct from the phrases of impulse; they expressed, like so many other things

about her, her poised intelligence: they had always made her seem older than she was.

"You mean that you told me a falsehood?" She said it very clearly.

"That's putting it pretty strong, isn't it?" he replied, with a flush of offence.

"It is putting it plainly. I'm afraid I'm too literal not to understand 'destroyed' as destroyed. It has been the word always used by us in referring to the book. Now you say that in burning one copy you kept another. I did not hold you capable of such deception!"

Her voice was hard as in the days of their first acquaintance—before he had conquered her instinctive antagonism. It had grown so much gentler and sweeter since their marriage that the tone, as well as her words, fell with the cold effect of a sudden breach between them. All a lifetime of scrupulous self-training in little things expressed itself in her reply. For her, to tell one lie was the same thing as telling a thousand.

"It is not as though I had *made* you destroy the book," she continued. "I stopped you when you were going to cast it in the fire that Christmas night at our house. I did not want you merely to please me. It was something that lay with your own conscience. Yet it meant a great deal to me when you said that you had done it voluntarily because you were convinced that it was the only right thing to do."

"Don't take it like that, Monica," he protested, trying to check his annoyance. "You are so exact. Do make some allowance for people who don't live by the letter. It is one of the discouraging things about you, that you have no imagination, no latitude in dealing with others. You are making a grand issue out of nothing. When I told you I had destroyed the manuscript, I thought I had. I suppose, when later I remembered the other copy, I ought to have corrected your impression." He floundered under the steady look with which she heard him out.

"What I started to ask," he went on more resolutely, "was whether you won't re-read the story, as long as it does exist. You might be induced to yield your point about its pernicious effect. This book would relieve the whole present situation. I am not well, I doubt if I can get another novel done now, and Bentley expects the contract to be filled this time. He has already begun announcing a new work by me. I need the money—and I need the relief and rest that it would give me. We all need it, in fact. We might be able to go to the Riviera for a while. . . . The doctor has urged it. Really, since you say my peace of mind matters so much to you, you might at least give me a chance by reading the story again."

"It is not necessary for me to re-read it," she answered, growing steadily colder. "I remember perfectly—I can't imagine myself forgetting. And what I thought before, I think still and shall always think. But you are a free agent. And if you think

that a need of *money* warrants you in going against your feeling of right—if you are satisfied to profit by injuring others, by spreading ideas to rob people of courage, by shouting out falsehood as though it were truth—what is there to say—except that you are not what I thought.”

He turned on her with the resentment roused by her display of rancour which was almost temper.

“One might think the story was a ‘Werther’ to make people blow out their brains. We are not living in a romantic age; people don’t take books that way any more.”

“We are living in a real age, of real books,” she replied unyielding. “And books *do* persuade. Remember that to write falsely is worse than to speak falsely, because your public is immeasurably larger. Even if you believed the book, there might be some frail excuse for publishing it, but *The Labyrinth of Life* stands for what you *don’t* believe.”

“I’m not so sure of that. What is life but the miserable, blind, ironic thing I represent it to be in the book? What cause have I to see it the wonderful, smug, smiling thing you allege it to be? Where is there any real demonstration of your optimistic theories?” he demanded passionately. “God knows, I began life hopefully enough, did my duty as I recognized it, slaved my youth out in an effort to get bread; struggled, scrambled on, clung to such spars as drifted my way—had a moment’s gleam of success, only to drop back into the slough again; and find myself at

thirty a wreck, incapable of work, a mere shell of futility, a dependent on you for support—and you tell me not to publish *The Labyrinth of Life* because it may discourage a stray reader! Let it discourage a reader, let it discourage the whole world, if the discouragement is the *truth*. Why shouldn't the world have the truth? You say a writer ought to write honestly. I am honest in the book you wanted me to throw in the fire, the only book that has meant anything, my only book that has any Art in it. Half the trouble with me now is that I have *not* been honest, and that is why the novel I am doing, to please you, to get money in a far baser way, has never got done—why it lies on my desk yonder a mass of incoherent, meaningless twaddle—would-be pabulum for school-girls, for people who dress up life to please their sentimental fancies. No wonder I loathe it, that I go to my study with disgust and humiliation over the whole farce of this imitated optimism of yours. But you aren't optimistic—you are no more honest with me than I have been with you. You know you believe the book, that you believe in what it says of heredity, that your opposition all along has been your sensitiveness, though you wouldn't be frank enough to say so. Instead, you come out with your sophistries, your talk of 'artistic responsibility.' ”

He had begun by merely contending on superficial grounds for the book, and he had ended, through passion gradually seizing him, in a complete avowal of the truth. With a rash hand he had swept down the

fabric of her faith in him, the effort she had made to hold him up to the ideals on which their marriage had been reared. He felt the tragedy of it, yet felt, too, a strange new sense of freedom. It seemed to him that his self-reliance was restored.

He pushed back his chair, and, rising, stood regarding her uncertainly. But she remained in cold immobility. An ember fell on the hearth with a little shock to the silence. The faint ticking of the clock was like the heart-beat of fate that had overtaken their life at last.

"Monica, forgive me if I have gone too far," he faltered, "but you have not realised all my book meant to me. An author's principles become vested in his books, as a woman's in her surroundings."

His last words seemed lost upon her; her eyes had a strange, almost sinister, gleam under her drawn brows. He felt a species of fear, which her silence only increased.

"You told me to search my conscience," he began again uneasily. "I have only suggested that you search your own. The situation is not one for quibbling. We are dealing with our problem of living. I cannot sacrifice my means of self-support for the sheer sake of a magnificently-attenuated ideal. If it is as my wife that the publication of this book seems wrong to you, that is one thing; but if other sentiments come into play, then it is different."

He stopped and waited, compelling her to speak.

"If a novelist is also a man, a wife is also a woman,"

she said at last. "You begin by attempting to humiliate me with your insinuations, and now you ask me to accept bread which *would* be as bitter in my mouth as it *ought* to be in yours. If our ease is to depend on compromise, then let us accept poverty. But all this is wide of the mark—perhaps needlessly dramatic, as you would say, but certainly needlessly insulting to me. I have received an order from the Arundel Society for some enamelling. I am to be well paid. You may go to the Riviera if you wish. And we can still each cling to what we choose to take as our ideals."

The slow red mounted to his cheek. "And suppose I was so mean-spirited as to comply—how about my contract with Bentley?"

"Your publisher had the opportunity to reimburse himself," she answered. "He returned the money because he had faith in you, but I promise you he shall not suffer if you never write another story."

He could tolerate no more. "I think you are right in saying our talk is wide of the mark," he returned bitingly. "Let this question of the manuscript rest for the present—but I don't promise *never* to publish it."

He turned and entered his study. He spent the remainder of the evening at his desk, with scattered sheets of the new story before him. All he wanted to write about was a description of a woman's brooding look that somehow was burned into his brain. But there was no room for this in his fiction.

CHAPTER IX

THE child, who had always been sickly, developed serious symptoms. Monica, fearing that her doctor did not understand the case, sent for a noted specialist in consultation; this new authority claimed to discover trouble in the spine, by which he explained not only the present feverish state, but also the weakness of one foot which had existed since the child's birth. While not actually saying that little Julian's life was in danger, his attitude seemed to imply as much; he objected to Monica's system of keeping the cradle near her as she worked in the studio, for he feared the effects of both the high temperature and the odour of the acids; and he insisted that a nurse should be engaged. Monica found a fairly good nurse; but at his next visit, the usual doctor, whether from the necessities of the case or because he did not wish to appear unfashionable as compared with the specialist, insisted that a trained nurse could alone watch the symptoms and dispense the medicines. To which Monica replied that any additional care could be given by her; but within thirty-six hours the child's state became really so alarming that she was forced to yield the point.

During all these anxious days Harding saw that Monica was divided between maternal duties and the

determination to provide necessary funds. She passed from the sick room to her studio, sacrificing her own health and strength. It was heroic, but profoundly exasperating; and Harding felt there was defiance in it, too, as though Monica was dominated by an almost fanatical obstinacy. She evidently intended to give him no excuse for sending off the manuscript on the plea of pecuniary pressure. She would save him from himself, from what in her opinion was a moral compromise. He had known, in youth, a similar enthusiast, a temperance relative, who, in dying, waved aside the spoonful of brandy on which he had been told his life depended.

Setting his teeth determinedly, and casting aside the over-fastidiousness which had always hampered his work, he toiled in his room while she toiled in her studio, and found savage satisfaction in seeing that he made real progress with his story, which flowed smoothly from the simple fact that he allowed it to flow. He no longer feared for it or doubted in himself: his sole concern was over the lapse of time required for the actual writing of so many thousand words a day. Meanwhile bills rained in so as to remind him of the dreary months at Mrs. Eversley's; living in Paris was no longer the cheap thing it had been considered, and being ill in Paris was a luxury few could afford. Then, one day, the child grew decidedly worse; a second specialist was called in, who required a night nurse as well as a day nurse and a complete new set of drugs, of dishes, of fittings, at all of which

Harding gazed in dismay. Going to his study, he looked over his manuscript. It would be another month before he would have it written to the end in its first rough form; even then developments might impose further important modifications. He felt that after all that had passed he could not afford to risk a rebuff from Bentley by submitting to them a rough unsatisfactory story; four weeks, perhaps six, were all that he needed—but that time he must have; and while it elapsed—poor Monica!

There was but one thing to do. He sent *The Labyrinth of Life* as a substitute; and, confident as he was of the value of the story, he asked for a further advance on his royalties.

That very night the child died.

The weeks that followed, in which their life appeared to resume much of its old daily aspects, were almost unendurable to Harding. He lived in suspense, not daring to speak of what lay most on his heart, though oppressed by the desire to bring to a point the issue that underlay the surface of their intercourse. Yet no opportunity was provided, for Monica did not even indirectly allude to their momentous argument. She was as calmly kind as formerly, and she took seemingly more pains than ever in attempting to attend to his comforts. Her love for him might be dead, but sense of wifely duty evidently had not lessened its claim. No matter what her feelings about him were, she would always do her duty, was his embittered reflection. She was Duty itself. At times he was almost

persuaded from her air that the loss of her child had put their conversation out of her mind. But he knew she was not the kind of woman who forgot.

Nicolls still came often to the house, but Harding almost hated him now. He felt that under the Englishman's friendliness, even in their affliction, there was a latent sense of criticism of him and pity for Monica. He had always been fond of little Julian, and Harding said to himself jealously, it sprang from old sentiments about Monica. Furthermore, the Englishman brought with him an air of prosperity and competence, of satisfaction with himself and the world, that added to Harding's feelings of dull, smouldering resentment. It was all a declaration of the mistake Monica had made not to marry him—a man in accord with her own character and views, who could care for her, give her ease. Now that she was disappointed in her husband, had perhaps given him up as utterly without redemption, such thoughts must sometimes cross her heart. Yet, far from interfering with their friendship, Harding rather pointedly left the two together to go to his study, where he sat idly brooding, picturing them there by the salon fire—Monica, in her black dress, grave, interested in the things of life they discussed together; Nicolls admiring, expressing by his attitude his sympathy for her. Yes, Nature had designed them for each other, he thought bitterly, and it was he—who had deluded Monica into marriage on the ground that therein lay a mission—stood between them!

One night he found on his study table a package from Bentley & Company. It was his manuscript, and he broke open the envelope of the letter which accompanied it.

He crushed the sheet furiously in his hand after he had read. They had returned *The Labyrinth of Life*. It was not in the line they had expected, it would be disastrous to the reputation he had made with *The Horns of the Altar*. They took even a magnificent moral tone: "We would not publish it," Mr. Hart wrote, "even if we counted on its selling by the thousands."

So Monica had been right?

He had not spoken to her of sending off the manuscript, he did not speak now of its return. But he felt that she knew—and triumphed. It would have taken a less human man than Harding not to resent all that her silence implied. Even though she were right, her attitude was intolerable. After an entire day of angry rebellion, he could no longer support it.

They sat by the fire that night, talking of indifferent things while Monica embroidered. Her slim white hands thus employed gave him in his nervous condition something of the old repugnance; and he had taken up his newspaper, professing to read it. After a little he glanced at her and saw that she was idly staring in the flames.

"Monica, what is the use of our going on like this," he burst out. "Why don't you be frank and tell me

what you think of me? Don't you suppose I know what your thoughts are? "

"Then what need is there of speaking?" she said quietly.

"But there is a reason. I can't bear living day after day with this silence between us. It's quite time we talked out what is in both our minds."

"What need is there of frankness now?" And her eyes deepened as she still regarded the fire. "I was frank when you asked me to marry you, and you were not. You choose a moment when it can do no good. It cannot alter the one great fact in our life."

"And that?"

"The mistake you made in asking me to marry you. I cannot help as you asked me to. You do not even wish me to. Did you ever wish it?"

"No, I never did in the way you mean. I loved you, and I wanted your love. It's why most men ask a woman to marry them. After all, does anything else matter?"

"A great deal matters to me."

"Yes. You don't value love, you think only of helping others, as though that was all marriage meant."

"And isn't love help?"

"Perhaps, but help isn't always love. I have tried to please you," he went on with increased feeling, "tried to adapt myself to your ideas, done it to the suppression of my own. And that has been the trouble, I fancy. I have been living a life of false adaptations. If I sent the manuscript to Bentley,

I did it because I had to—it was the only thing left to do.”

She remained silent, and he felt that there she did not, never would yield.

“It is true,” he said, after a pause, “that you meant more to me than my own convictions when I married you. If I deceived you in promising to mould myself to your views of life, I deceived myself as well. I thought I could. I find I can’t. Why can’t you accept me as I am, Monica? Suppose I do find life a melancholy, hopeless riddle? Why should you cease to care for me because I do? And perhaps you would find it so, if you really allowed yourself to see things as they are. Then we could face its failure together, find the solace love gives, and the rest—well, the rest could go. But you are a woman born with the fixed idea that you have a mission to reform the world. You think you have a mission to reform me, to force me to see things as you see them. Yet I wonder if, after all, I don’t face the truth more squarely than you do . . . than any woman ever does.” He drew a breath of emotion. “That’s why we’ve never found any real happiness together. I suppose it was wrong to get you to marry me, knowing what I am, what you are.”

He spoke with the nervousness of a man who has too long held his feelings in check. It was a relief to give vent to it all, although he was conscious of the brutality with which he presented it.

“It was my fault—for you are much younger than

I—yes, I should have known how it would all end,” he added, staring moodily into the fire.

“And I, too,” she replied slowly, “I was not too young. I was never too young . . . I left youthfulness to my mother.” But there was no irony in her voice.

Her air touched him, and he said in a changed tone:

“Oh, Monica, if only you sometimes hesitated over questions of ethics—or, rather, if you thought less about life, took it differently, in a more simple way! I know I have disappointed you. But could it have been otherwise? This trying to make people what they aren’t, can never be. There’s the tragedy of it all. One can’t make people over—they have to be what they are.”

“Yes, perhaps I was too credulous,” she answered, with her first bitter touch.

He got up and paced the room in a fit of futile rebellion against himself, against her, against the whole coil of things.

“And nothing can ever make us alike,” he resumed after a moment. “We are opposed as much as certain forces in nature. They say marriage adjusts. . . . I remember it was what Miss Vanderhurst so confidently held. But what ever really adjusts two people as contrary as you and I? I make you unhappy—I shall always make you unhappy. There is no solution that I can see.”

“Say it for yourself if you wish,” she answered; “not for me, for I still can hope.”

“Your hope !” he replied, “it is part of your whole

attitude. You won't give it up—your 'mission'; you'll still aim to make me something else than I am. We can be happy in just being our human selves."

"I can never be happy drifting," she said intensely; "life would not be worth the living so. It was not meant that it should be—without effort, without courage, without even self-respect." She lifted her head and her grey eyes fixed him.

"But unless you yield something, how are we to find the least bit of peace? It isn't that I'm utterly without redemption, it is only your thinking so. If I hold one thing one day, another the next, if my feelings and points of view change, it's because I am the artist type. Can't you make allowance for that in me?"

"I am not thinking of the artist, I am thinking of the man," she responded.

"The 'man,' " he laughed shortly. "As though 'the man,' as you call it, wasn't always crucified in the artist. You mean I'm weak, and what artist isn't weak, when it comes to that? Don't you see that nature sacrifices one thing in giving the world another? It is the artist's weakness that is his strength. An artist isn't normal, he never was normal. If you conventionalize him, if he sees, acts, feels like other people, he is stripped of his usefulness, of the only side that makes his power."

"If I thought that, if I thought 'art' meant the shirking of ordinary responsibilities of living, was based on moral flabbiness, I should lose all respect for

it. And it isn't so—the greatest artists have always been men one *could* respect."

He smiled sarcastically. "I'm afraid you haven't read the biographies of genius, then. But I doubt if even that would shake your views. Nothing would make you give up what means more to you than love or happiness."

"I have wanted to help your life, not hinder it," she returned; and her eyes still gazed darkly in the flame. "But you had no right to hinder mine. You owed me fairness in the beginning. How dared you ask me to marry you"—and her pale face gathered a sudden proud emotion—"feeling as you do? Not about 'art,' but about all that was most sacred, most vital to me. What do you suppose every day, every moment, has been to me since you told me that you believed in your book and its theories—have always believed them. My being your wife under the circumstances is a humiliation. It can only mean that in your eyes I committed wrong to marry you. No artist plea can excuse you there. Even an artist"—and her lip showed her sense of outrage—"can be merciful. And what mercy did you show me? But why should I speak of your weakness. . . . I was weaker than you."

"Why do you take it like that, Monica?" he said, pleadingly. "I never meant to wrong you. I don't see how I wrong you now. It is only your pride and sensitiveness. You regard the story as though it passed judgement on you. And you know I never intended that. It is unjust, it's foolish, to hold the

book against me. What difference can it make, if we love each other? "

"What difference? You make me speak of the manuscript then. Well, let us speak of it. And what did the sending of it to your publisher mean? It meant that you cast contempt on your own child. I pass over what the humiliation was to me—that may go. Perhaps it was best that Julian died. . . . He might have grown up to read *The Labyrinth of Life*."

At that moment, Nicolls entered the salon, and Harding, murmuring some curt apology, left the apartment.

CHAPTER X

"I WANT to leave Chicot with you. I'm going to London to get some clothes; I wouldn't separate myself from the dear little soul for anything less important than clothes. And where I've learned I can't trust Buttercup with herself, imagine my trusting her with Chicot! I wish I hadn't quarrelled with that M.P. who was such a dear friend of mine—he could have had that damned English dog law repealed, and now I know he's helping to keep it, just to spite me!"

The poet delivered himself of this speech without a pause, as he sat down uninvited at the table Harding was occupying on the terrace of Weber's. The invitation to care for his dog, like the invitation to buy a drink for himself, had evidently come to Colston on seeing his former friend, whom he greeted with a cordiality which was scarcely returned. Still, Harding had no reason for insulting Buttercup's husband; indeed, he was one of the few people who had never actually quarrelled with Percy. That was what friends were invented for, in Percy's opinion. "Out of my great quarrels I make little songs," he had once informed Harding.

"I wish some one would invent a drink that would give an appetite for life instead of merely for dinner," he remarked, after the waiter had filled his order. "And

there is no *apéritif* that inspires me nowadays with a desire to dine at home. To sit opposite Buttercup gives me the feeling that I have had a full meal before I have even tasted soup. It is wonderful what a sense of satiety some women cause." And he sighed wearily. "I used to think there was nothing like committing a mistake. It gives you something to remedy. But there is no remedying Buttercup—unless she gets a divorce, and that is so unoriginal. It is one of those uninteresting privileges like having a soul or a vote in America. There is nothing left any more that isn't vulgar. For instance, what is more vulgar than sitting here with you in the rue Royale? Americans have made the Boulevards as bad as Broadway. I wonder what Barbey d'Aurévilly and other Empire dandies would think if they came back and saw them. Yes, Paris has changed, and Americans are responsible for it. I wish some one would undiscover America. But then I see it darkly through Miss Zenobia, who is coming to pay us a visit. I shan't dine at home then, I promise you. How I hate that woman: can you imagine any worse nightmare than her sunbursts and her love string? That is one of the beautiful memories I have of Mrs. Eversley. Poor woman, she *did* understand how to dress and carry off her hair. What pains she took to keep herself a plausible blonde. When she asked me what the colour of her hair ought to be, I said ash. Yes, Nature meant her to be an ash-blonde, she had an ash-blonde soul. And so she spent her time ashing, only the raven was always rising, like a phoenix,

from the ashes. She shouldn't have quarrelled with me—it was one of her mistakes. But she was always committing them. I think I must have caught the habit from her. But the tragedy is not making them, but living with them. I wish Buttercup would go and live with somebody else for a while. It would be a rest for her and a rest for me, and for all the rest too. It is what always happens if an artist marries. If an artist marries at all it ought to be a woman who offers no resistance—who is only a blotter to her husband's copy. And above all, she ought to know how to efface herself. But women are like Solomon's slave in *Prior*. 'Abra was ready when I called her name, and though I called another, Abra came.' It is their genius for always being about, that I most object to. That's why I'm leaving Buttercup at home, and won't leave Chicot there—she'd have worried him into nervous prostration by the time I got back." Sometimes Percy talked, as Hippocleides danced, in a style pleasing to himself, but disgusting to others. Well might Buttercup say that she could hardly even quote Tennyson at him in claiming to be "something better than his dog." But Harding did not share his enthusiasm, and demurred over the prospect of accepting such a tedious responsibility during Colston's absence.

Harding paid one or two calls that afternoon, and returned home to find Chicot curled up in his own arm-chair. Monica informed him that Percy Colston had called, bringing the dog, and saying Julian had promised to care for it. Harding protested that he had

never said anything of the kind, and was shocked to observe that Monica did not even pretend to believe it. So this was the result of his equivocation over the manuscript burning. Monica did not tell him what had occurred during the call, but he could well imagine. Percy had no doubt been as free in his statements about his wife as about his dog. Harding taxed himself with not having spoken of those visits to Buttercup, for he had no means of knowing how far Colston's characteristic spiteful insinuations might have gone.

He was alarmed to feel that Colston's very liberty in coming to the house had widened the breach between Monica and him. It showed a hidden intimacy between her husband and the man who had attacked her in so cowardly a way by suggesting that her life-tragedy should be exploited commercially in book form. It was a point of view which left Harding almost powerless to defend himself. If she was not a woman to forgive deception, she was still less one to forgive unfaithfulness. Monica's eyes were hard as she interrupted him.

"You are a free agent," was all she said. She had used those identical words, in referring to the publication of the manuscript. Jealousy and principle, therefore, awakened kindred sentiments in her.

Yes, she was more human than he thought, he reflected that night, as he faced her at dinner. There was a bitter brooding look in her eyes—the look that more than once had belied her calm exterior. The mask concealed that which made him oddly nervous

as he speculated over it. There were mysteries about Monica's character that it was hopeless to gauge. Her strange eyes had once attracted him like her beautiful hands, but he preferred now to avoid both. The meal passed almost in silence, and that night Monica took possession of the extra sleeping chamber of the apartment. If he had doubted the meaning of her air before, he could doubt it no longer.

Pride withheld him from attempting to soften her apparent impressions as to Buttercup. As Nicolls chanced to call on Monica the following evening, Harding pointedly left them alone together. He persuaded himself that he at all events was superior to jealousy—yet he knew that a rage of jealousy burned his heart; and to preserve his rôle he left the house. It was his sole way to contain himself. Only after he was out did it occur to him what conclusions Monica might draw; she knew Buttercup's husband was in London.

* * * * *

Harding lunched out the next day, and returned to an empty apartment late in the afternoon. Monica had probably gone to do some tardy marketing. Their servant had left them that morning and Harding had proposed they dine at a restaurant. But Monica would have her own way.

For several days the weather had been so mild that he had had no fire in his study; it had fallen chilly again, and he entered the small room expecting to find the salamander unlighted. He was in the habit of resting

on the couch there for a half-hour before dinner, to make up for loss of sleep at night, for he still could not conquer his habit of sleeplessness. But Monica had made the fire in preparation for his return . . . she was always mindful of his comfort. It touched him keenly that she should have done such rough work. He could not go on like this. Yes, she might well be excused for repenting that she had married him! He stretched himself on the couch, and yielding to fatigue, soon fell asleep. His repose was fitful, however, and he was pursued by disturbing dreams.

He was awakened, after a little, by Chicot's efforts to attract his attention. The dog was whining, and its evident distress aroused him in a dim, dazed way. Then, as consciousness came more distinctly, he was aware of suffocation, of a roaring like water in his ears. Struggling into a sitting position, he put his hands to his head to steady himself—his temples were throbbing violently.

An instant need of air caused him to stagger to the window and raise it. Breathing in gasps, he leaned there, until his mind grew clearer, his lungs free. Then he remembered Chicot. The little animal lay now on the floor, its body shaken by convulsions. Fearing for its life, Harding carried it into the kitchen, where he dashed water on its head, and after some moments it revived.

On his return to the study he found that though the pure outside air had freshened it, there still lingered the sickening smell of oxide of carbon. The ponderosity

of the gas, sinking to the floor, had affected Chicot first. The dog's efforts to arouse him had saved both their lives.

Cursing salamanders as wretched, dangerous things, he tottered over to examine the stove. The workman who had set it up had cautioned him to see that the lid was always securely closed. There was a small chink open, through which poison had permeated the atmosphere of the small study. It had been careless of Monica . . . and she was not often careless. But she had probably been in haste to get her purchases before nightfall.

He thought of what her feelings would be—coming home and finding him unconscious, dead perhaps from asphyxiation. She would be stricken with horror, of course, at the sight, and reproach herself for being the cause.

Yet—he mused a little bitterly—might not there be relief in the end? The relief of no longer being bound to a man who offended her feelings about life, who had not succeeded even in making a home for her. Yes, he had a picture of her in her calm, dignified widowhood. Nicolls would come to offer sympathy as she struggled on, alone, with her Art work. Then, after a decent while, he would propose to her again. . . and this time she would accept him.

It was rather a pity after all the accident hadn't done its work—rid her of him! It might as well have happened. He hadn't much hold of life. He never had had. He was one of the Creator's mistakes.

His marriage had been a mistake, as Percy Colston said. *The Labyrinth of Life* had been another. What a part it had played in his life. It had pursued him like a Nemesis, weaving into all the issues of his marriage.

The remembrance of the book, always ready to come into his mind as the cause of his unhappiness, started a train of thought. It was broken, a little confused, for his head was still heavy and violently aching.

It occurred to him that the salamander would have been a much more artistic way of killing the victim in his story than the one he had devised. It would have been as simple and as effective, and it could be so easily attributed to unintentional causes, explained as a "deplorable accident." Who would have doubted? Yes, it was such an easy way to get rid of some one—he wondered criminals did not oftener adopt it.

If Monica had meant to dispose of him in that way who would have dreamed of suspecting her? As she had once affirmed, she struggled to combat any evil tendencies that might have been handed down to her from her criminal grandmother.

He wondered if Monica knew that her hands were in themselves a kind of provocation for moral struggle. He supposed she didn't—like her mother—ever go to consult Madame de Kansa, and consequently she had never seen the cast of the Marquise de Brinvillier's hands. He wondered in a dull way whether poisoners had a definite type of hand. Whether Monica had

inherited hers from her grandmother. It was absurd that she should possess such an incongruity . . . a poisoner's hands. The refined, lady-like sort, of course. The kind one naturally associated with a Marquise de Brinvilliers . . . or a Mrs. Perdoe.

Was there in Monica a kind of fear—a fear lying deep down in her consciousness—that, granting she knew about her hands, she might have strange temptations?

How absurd to suppose that Monica ever had such thoughts. Yet the idea of Monica in connection with her ancestry continued to haunt him. He had never really thought out what it all must have meant to her. How little he really knew her. He remembered the night he had stood, unseen, at the threshold of her studio and watched her work. Her face had been strange. He would not have believed it could look so hard, as she bent over her scales, measuring in that fine, delicate way the white powder she poured out of the bottle. One could always take it for granted that there were closets, dark rooms, secret drawers.

Yet, as to Monica, the association with weakness was ridiculous. He had only to remember her arguments with him. The moral elevations she asserted, her continual insistence on ideals, were almost superhuman. Yet who argued theology better than the devil?

He had arrived, before he knew it, at suspicion.

She might argue, she might try to live on a high plane, but behind her was a criminal grandmother, and nearer was a frivolous mother who, late in life, had misappropriated a fortune, and had started out in girlhood as a perjurer—he was sure she had—when called as a witness to save Mrs. Perdoe. Now Monica's turn to be tempted might have come—passion urged on by the demon of jealousy which Percy had raised. And Harding had noted that jealousy had upon her an effect akin to principle.

A piece of circumstantial evidence was added to the theory about Monica which was forging itself in his brain. The servant . . . why had she discharged the servant that very morning? She had said it was because the girl was unsatisfactory. But it also left her alone to carry out her designs. Monica had gone away, presumably on a marketing expedition. But marketing ought to be done in the morning.

He heard her enter, and he sat silent, waiting.

She went to the rear of the apartment, no doubt to deposit her purchases. But now she came towards his study. He could hear her step and how it paused outside the door.

Why did she pause? Was she wondering if her attempt on his life had been successful?

He coughed, and she opened the door.

She presented herself to his observing eyes in the rôle he might have expected. She was quietly dressed, as one would dress in going shopping. Her veil was

raised and one hand ungloved; she had discarded it on entering the house. How innocent she looked in her young maturity. She seemed surprised at finding him sitting up and looking pale, disturbed. She looked just surprised enough—not too much so.

“Is that you?” he said. It was a banal question, such as one utters often.

“Yes, I was wondering if you were asleep.”

He smiled ironically. “I might have enjoyed eternal sleep. Colston’s dog awoke me in time. The lid of the stove was not shut. I was almost asphyxiated.”

“But surely I closed it!”

“You left a nice little chink,” he returned.

She looked shocked. “Julian! Oh, how careless of me! How do you feel now?” She came forward and put out her hand.

“Don’t!” he exclaimed, thrusting her aside. “I can’t bear you to touch me . . . with those hands.”

“My hands!” she echoed.

“Yes, your hands! I hate them! How did you happen to have hands like that? They are like the cast of the Marquise de Brinvilliers’ . . .”

“The Marquise de Brinvilliers?” From her air one might have supposed she didn’t know, but of course she knew.

“She was a lady of the last century,” he answered grimly; “quite an interesting person; I wonder you have never read her biography. She throws her

modern imitators in the shade. Don't pretend you never saw her hands at Madame de Kansa's."

Still she did not appear to understand, but she drew enough from his air to say: "I have never been to Madame de Kansa's; she was my mother's friend, not mine."

"H—m; you are right not to go," he sneered. "She mayn't be an inspired prophet, but she draws queer conclusions sometimes. Suppose she was to say accidents with salamanders can be happy solutions—suppose she should describe you as a prosperous widow——"

"A prosperous widow!" she repeated.

"Yes, a pleasantly re-married widow, and, whatever *you* might think, Nicolls couldn't be grateful enough to that little dose of carbonic gas. So easy, who would suspect? I wonder that wives with worthless husbands don't think of it oftener."

It appeared that she knew he was not well, that it was foolish to attach importance to his words. He looked so pale, so overwrought, that her solicitude was aroused to a degree that it dominated everything else. But he was in the grip of his suspicions. He remembered how well she had acted at the garden party when, as he knew from Miss Fitzgerald, her smile in crowning Percy Colston disguised her actual dislike. He would make himself plainer, since it was necessary.

But he was spared this. It suddenly came to her.

"You mean you think that I did it on purpose?"

His look, his smile sufficed. She stood rigid a moment; seemed to make an effort to speak, and not succeed; another moment passed, during which he could not make sure whether her attitude was hesitation or powerlessness. Then she left the room.

He did not bother about her going. He felt the emptiness of the room, and hugged the dog which had saved him. He did not care much about anything. Oh, yes, he did—he wanted air.

CHAPTER XI

HIS instinct was blindly to escape the house, escape Monica. He carried the dog along, because the little animal had saved his life; besides, they were companions in misery.

He made his way downstairs and drew in long, reviving breaths as he reached the street. His head still violently throbbed, but his mind was beginning to clear, and he asked himself where he was going. Anywhere would do.

He walked as far as the quays, still with uncertain step; but, as he caught sight of the Seine, a strange, sudden, reeling sensation took him, and he made his way to a convenient corner tavern, where he called for brandy. It revived him, and he moved on again. But before long a recurrence of the after-effects of poisoning seized him, and he was just able to get as far as the next tavern and sink down on a seat. The sensations were so alarming that he thought he was going to die. He wondered what was the effect on the dog. It was breathing in short gasps, with occasional convulsive tremors, and, soothing it, he poured a few drops of brandy and water down its throat. Then, yielding to drowsy fatigue, he nodded, finally to start awake with a sense of choking and a dream of Monica over him with her horrible white hands; but he had

nevertheless slept some time, and meanwhile night had deepened. He looked at the clock: it was after eight. He ought to get something to eat; and, staggering out of the wine shop—where the proprietor viewed him as an eccentric inebriate—he found a cab and drove to a restaurant on the other side of the river. His wretchedness craved some brilliantly lighted place where there were faces, music perhaps. He feared to be alone in the night, with the strange reeling sensations coming to him at intervals. But the restoratives he had hastily gulped down had helped. It sustained him for the moment, permitted him to think a little, though it was confused thinking, and his mind was still unable to grapple with any question beyond immediate ways and means. He hugged the dog to his breast, endeavouring to give the animal comfort; it, too, was plainly suffering. Once or twice he fancied it had gasped its last.

Only when seated in the restaurant after ordering something to eat at hasty random, did the problem what to do with Chicot present itself. Much as he hated Colston at that moment, he was aware what an accident to the dog would mean to him. The poet was attached to it, as he knew. He did not want it to die on his hands. He saw that his condition and that of his companion were attracting a great deal of attention round him. He regretted coming to such a public place; but he had not the strength to leave. And he sat on, eating with nausea, and drinking more than he ate. The wine was beginning to check the

violent pin-wheel spinning inside his brain. He considered the situation while he tempted Chicot with morsels from his plate—but the animal refused food and had begun whining, as though not sharing the other's satisfaction with their surroundings. It was a delicate, aristocratic little dog, and manifested, Harding fancied, the sentiment that if it was going to die, it desired to do so on its own silken bed at home in the Colstons' lordly mansion.

Harding finally decided that the best thing altogether was to deliver it into Buttercup's care. The lateness of the hour—for he had dallied over his neglected meal—warned him that if he was to put the resolve into effect that night, he must lose no time.

On the way to the Avenue du Bois de Boulogne he dosed again from the effect of the wine he had drunk, and only started awake as the vehicle stopped.

Buttercup was fortunately at home—she had just returned from an evening entertainment, the servant informed him, with a rather condemnatory air, as he marked the visitor's dishevelled appearance. The servants at the Colstons' were of a stately order, and emanated a consciousness of being object-lessons in deportment. No doubt the proprieties were more respected below stairs than above. The man's manner was, however, just the brace Harding needed at the moment, and he entered the drawing-room with self-possession.

It was a salon of great dimensions, a succession of rooms in which a glare of gorgeousness melted into

impressive perspective. Hiram Baxter had given wholesale orders for the decoration of the house, in which Percy's own taste raised a feeble cry, as a drowning man on a spar signals to the bellied bulk of an ocean steamer. The pieces of furniture that had represented Percy's purchase of Mrs. Eversley's refined pretensions scattered about ached with more than antiquity's rheumatism in this oasis of splendour. "Surpassing Ceylon" seemed stamped on everything, as golden bees of Napoleon bloom on First Empire furniture.

Harding advanced, bearing Chicot under his arm like a burdened Pilgrim in the House Beautiful. Buttercup was at a desk re-reading a note, and from the absorption expressed in the act, her visitor felt sure it was not written to Percy. Her gay, satin-lined cloak, which she had cast on a chair, made a vivid splash of colour. But the regality of the tegument she had discarded had only concealed the regality of the costume under it. Buttercup was a duchess to-night in all the imitated insignia of clothes. Harding had not seen her in evening dress for several years, and he was struck by the effect. She was certainly a splendid animal. Her reddish hair shone beneath the electric chandelier that blazed with the recklessness of knowing it could be paid for and the amount never missed. Buttercup's beauty was the kind that could stand light. If anything, light reduced it to that less barbarian glow which was its owner's aim since she had mixed with more anæmic members of a

semi-fashionable world. She was bending over the desk; and, at a distance, ere she looked up, Harding's glance caught sight of the strong black scrawl. Buttercup's hand was as dashing as the rest of her—a few sentences filled a page.

"Good heavens!" she exclaimed, "why on earth are you coming at this hour . . . and what is the matter with you? You look like a resurrected Lazarus!"

"I am," he said grimly, "I have just been resuscitated . . . and haven't had time to change my grave clothes. So please excuse their death damps. Your man crossed himself when he saw me and called on all the saints. But I am quite harmless, so don't be alarmed." And he laughed rather foolishly.

"But I am," she said. "I never saw such a sight. And why are you hugging Chicot?"

"Oh, well, because Chicot is my mascot. If it weren't for him, I should not be here. He deserves a better fate than asphyxiation, so I am returning him to a safer atmosphere—steam heat. Please take him." And he sat down suddenly on the chair near him. "Give me a little brandy, won't you?"

"Of course, you can have some if you want," she responded, still examining him in doubt. "But I should say you have already had enough to drown a Duke of Clarence." Buttercup's allusions were certainly getting literary. "Influence of Percy," Harding murmured to himself as he returned aloud:

"Oh, don't butt me any Duke of Clarence butts, Buttercup,"—admiring his own sorry wit and appre-

ciating the alliteration, "but get me some brandy, and then I'll tell you all the secrets of my prison house." His own humour was so *outré* to himself that he wondered at it.

"Oh, if you can be that bright," she returned sarcastically. She touched the bell and bade the servant bring brandy. Harding waited without speech, and after he had swallowed a generous glassful, he sat regarding her with bright eyes. The chandeliers had multiplied, and he imagined they were shaking with mirth at his sally. He felt like making sallies one after another. "Yes, I'll out-dazzle the Colston chandeliers," he said to himself.

"And now, perhaps, you'll tell me why I am honoured with this absolutely inexcusable late call, my dear Julian," he heard Buttercup's voice float to him from immeasurable distances; "I am not in the habit of receiving visitors at midnight, and it is not considered *comme il faut*, you know, to enter a lady's drawing-room asking for drinks, as though you were at Maxim's."

He raised a protesting hand. "Now, Buttercup," he said, "don't you use that 'familiar quotation' French of yours. If you want to be familiar, be it in ordinary English. But we never have been familiar, have we?" His voice had an odd drawl. "I don't care what Percy says . . . we haven't. We haven't, and Monica needn't say we have. He called at my prison house and told things that nearly caused my death. I declare to you he nearly caused my death.

The trouble he has made has just bred like rabbits . . . No, like salamanders. I suppose you know what a salamander is? Francis the First adopted them . . . to express what he thought of women. You remember what he wrote with a diamond ring on the window pane at his chateau, what's the name of it? . . . Sham something, down in Touraine? You must have seen it when you took that motor trip of yours. Was it a motor trip or was it a motive trip, Buttercup? "

"You're drunk or out of your head," she said.

"What do you mean by coming here in your cups? "

"Yes," he sallied, "I am in my cups, my buttercups, and so I fly to my butterfly."

"I think the best thing for you would be to go home," she said hastily, as she directed a glance towards the hall. For once she was rather glad to think the servant was hanging inquisitively about. She preferred tea-drinkers to brandy-drinkers, and Julian's grotesque state made her ill at ease.

"But I haven't any home," he asserted thickly, "that's why I came to see you—I haven't any home. I never was good at making homes. No, nobody will carve that on my tomb, that I was a good homemaker. I don't know what I'm good for. You can tell me. You used to think something of me, didn't you, Tea-rose? "

"I don't know what I used to think of you," was her answer, "but I know what I think of you now. If you don't tell me why you are here, I shall really have to excuse myself." And she made an impatient stir.

"Oh, do you have to excuse yourself, too?" he said, with an air of interest. "I thought that was my vocation. I've been excusing myself ever since I was born. I've been excusing myself ever since I was married. I ought to have excused myself for not getting out of the world this afternoon . . . me and Chicot. It was my Creator's place to do the excusing . . . but he shoved it on me. Wasn't right, but he did." And his face gloomed. "I'm in the way, Buttercup," he went on with sudden hoarseness. He leaned towards her. "That's the secret of my prison-house . . . I'm in the way. Give me your hand, Buttercup . . . I want to look at your hand. See what kind of a hand you've got." He tried to take it.

"My hand, as it happens, is already given." She laughed a little harshly. "There's nothing the matter with it . . . there never was. If you've come here to re-examine it, my dear Julian, you're wasting your time." And instinctively her glance fell on the unfinished note on the *escritoire* near her.

"Yes, it was a nice hand," he mused. "You oughtn't to have given it to Percy, you know. It's a royal flush; your mistake was to bluff when you had the jack-pot playing straight. So you lost. And if I'd only held your hand—for life—I'd have won."

"I'm greatly flattered, I assure you," she replied with a short laugh, the laugh that had come with her marriage. "But you are rather late in reaching that conclusion." She regarded him fixedly for a moment before she went on: "I can guess you have had a

falling out with that ideal wife of yours. And you would like me to play the consolation prize. It was what I always knew would happen. Do you imagine"—and her eyes were bright with the vehemence of long-nurtured feelings—"that I have ever forgiven you for the way you treated me? I hate you for it, I hate you for what it drove me to. You have ruined my life, and I hope you have ruined your own . . . you *have* ruined it. If there ever was a ruin, you are one to-night . . . a ruin without even ivy or any other picturesque feature of ruins about you. I saw you were going down hill, that first day when I met you in the Bois, when you talked about 'moving slow.' Yes, you are slow, slow in everything but the way you have crumbled to nothing . . . that was fast enough. Now you can tell yourself I've been playing with you. . . . Do you understand? Hiram Baxter, the tea merchant's daughter, who wasn't good enough for you to propose to, has been amusing herself with you. And now I think you had better leave." She breathed sharply. "I'll send you and your brandy home in my motor." And she rang the bell.

Her words half sobered him.

"Once again, there's enough motive without your motor," he said. "Here's Chicot—I suppose it's he brought me. He's got a right here, any way. I'll leave him to shake his jester's bells. Life is a jest, and some things show it; I used to think so, but it was left for you to make me know it. That's not how it goes, but I guess it will do. As you are fond of quota-

tions, my dear Primrose—or, shall I say, Primcup—I needn't apologize."

* * * * *

Harding returned to his house in the early morning light. He had a dimmed sense of wandering through rain-soaked streets and having been wet and tired and miserable. He neither knew nor cared about it now. Daylight had cleared his brain just as the night air had cleared his study of miasmas. He had gone to a hotel to make himself presentable and get his early coffee. And now he was prepared to face Monica, ready to accept his responsibilities and to spare hers.

Strong physical and moral reactions had freed him from such strains of weakness and morbidness as had survived his theoretical speculations. The salamander episode was a mere vague nightmare, he had gone back beyond that. He realized that he had tried his wife: he convinced himself that nerve-control and common-sense could yet mend things. He had but to recognize the vanity of trying to explain things of life on which people tried to found principles: as a writer, he knew how much people would innocently accept in daily life, while denouncing it in their finest language. He told himself: "She is my wife, she has made sacrifices for me; she accepted all, so long as I did not force my views on her; my attempts to make her understand conditions have caused more trouble than the conditions themselves; we got on while I was leading a perfectly egotistical life; why should we not continue

to get along in silence, provided I make the effort to be tactful and generous in little ways, and conciliate her without her knowing it."

He reached his house door; the janitress called to him as he passed the lodge.

"Madame has gone out," the woman said with a leer.

"Did she say how long she would be?" Harding asked carelessly, thinking of the usual morning errands.

"She said nothing. But she took her trunks."

CHAPTER XII

MONICA, in leaving the apartment, had had no definite idea beyond gaining the outside world, where she could think and act in freedom. She gave Elsie Fitzgerald's new address in the Avenue Victor Hugo to the cabman, intending to leave her trunks there until she could make plans for the future; and it seemed to her that the horse walked at snail pace, so harassed was she by the thought Harding might follow her, demand pardon, bid her return. And she knew that all he might say would fall on an unheeding ear, that she would not be able to respond. Power of speech was frozen in her, everything dead except mere mechanical acts; the practised self-control of a lifetime had deserted her, leaving her prey to a dull sense of desperation and outrage. Stabbed to the quick by the implication of his words, she could never bear even to see him again. He had released her from all obligation as a wife; the woman was all that was left; and her womanhood was her own henceforth.

She yielded almost without resistance to Elsie Fitzgerald's plea that she share her home; Monica tasted new pleasures in such passiveness, and perhaps Miss Fitzgerald did, too.

Monica rested for several days, during which Julian wrote to her, and she answered with a firm brevity

which she knew would be accepted as final. Then she went out to visit various art dealers on whom she would depend thenceforth for her means of livelihood. But now that the weight of her pain began to lift a little under the relief of occupation, now that she could forget for an occasional instant that her husband had even for a moment considered her a murderess, the grounds for his suspicions appeared more clearly before her. He reproached her not only with her heredity, in the power of which she knew he believed, but also with having hands like the Marquise de Brinvilliers, whose history Monica now read up. She had never been to Madame de Kansa's; she determined to go and see at least the casts to which Harding had alluded—and, perhaps, see the prophet-psychologist, too.

Madame de Kansa's waiting-room seemed, in its peculiar furnishings, a reflection of the famous chiromancer herself. It was as full of strange objects as its owner's mind was stored with strange knowledge. The seeress's position in Paris was unique. She claimed to have elevated palm-reading to an exact science which could be of practical benefit in directing one's life. There was no cheap charlatanism in the way she dealt with clients, none of the usual hocus pocus practised by those who sound the future. Even those who came to her holding the opinion about palmists Voltaire entertained about priests—that human credulity made all their science—went away convinced of one thing at least, that Madame de Kansa

was an astute psychologist. It was by reading the heart as well as the hand, by her magnetism and art of sympathy, and by strict conscientiousness about the advice she gave, that this ardent follower of Desbarolles had become a force in the Paris world.

Monica, her face covered by a heavy veil, looked about her curiously as she waited. Opposite to her on the wall was a full-length portrait of Madame de Kansa, done by a celebrated French artist, a masterly delineation of the original's pale, tragic face, with its deep-red sybilline lips. A cabinet near by held, among other objects, a Cagliostro manuscript. There were rare old astrological tomes, magic crystals, and examples of Eastern mystic art. Scattered about the room were numberless signed photographs of notabilities, on which were inscribed flattering testimonials to the skill with which the seeress had deciphered their fate. But Monica's glance rested on these things impatiently. It sought the only object in the room that interested her—the plaster casts of the Marquise de Brinvilliers' hands.

It was for that she had come. Julian had lied to her once, which meant that he might lie again—and she wished to know the truth. The casts lay among a variety of similar ornaments on a table; and, after a moment, trusting to the absorption of the other clients in their own affairs, she arose and took up the object with an air of casual attraction.

Yes, it resembled her hand—so much so that Julian might well be impressed. Yet, after the first shock of

the discovery, she examined the cast more closely, comparing it with her own ungloved hand. They were alike, it was true, in general conformation; but there were differences, too, many small differences. She drew a breath of half relief. But the resemblance was sufficiently striking to decide her. She would see Madame de Kansa, and trust to the disguise of the thick veil. The palmist was almost a stranger—they had met only once, that time at the house, and it was likely the other had forgotten her.

But among Madame de Kansa's other gifts was an unusual memory; and the night she had dined at Mrs. Eversley's she had chanced to remark Monica's hands caressing the ivory paper-knife, with Harding near by. Her trained powers of observation had, indeed, remarked far more. The daughter of her pretty butterfly friend had interested her as a type, especially in view of what she knew of the family history—Mrs. Eversley had told her much in consulting her. When, later, she had received the announcement of the marriage of Miss Eversley to the young American writer who had once interviewed her, she was not surprised, she had anticipated the mutual attraction and what might follow. Nor did she need to be told why Monica had sought her—the veil was in itself a betrayal. But that she concealed, as she also concealed the fact that she recognized the identity of her client.

She had been fond of Mrs. Eversley, whose child-like trust in her counsels had both touched her and

been useful to her in Mrs. Eversley's set; and she meant to deal gently with the daughter. Yet her professional pride was aroused by Monica's haughty, almost slighting manner. "I wish you to be frank," her visitor had said with repressed antagonism, as she took a seat in the little private office at a table, with its shaded lamp. And the seeress had told many truths.

"Self-suppression," she observed after a little, "is, madame, your most dominant trait. You are an exceptional instance of mental and moral reaction. Your girlhood had a great shock, and it has left you hard with yourself and others. It is one of the causes of your present unhappiness."

"I am not unhappy," Monica returned rebelliously.

"If you say that," was the calm response, "it is because you are unacquainted with happiness. Your life has been grounded on the hypothesis that duty and struggle are all. You have sacrificed your heart to your head. You have reasoned out your way, you have never been guided by a woman's best safeguard—her instinct. A woman, before all else, is a creature of feeling. You have not given your emotions a chance, madame. It is a side of your nature that you have deliberately starved. But it is less your own fault than that of circumstance. You have allowed yourself to be too much affected by some ancestral handicap."

"Then my ancestry has been a handicap?" And, instinctively, Monica withdrew her hand, which the

seeress had bade her place on the table where the lamp cast its revealing light. Madame de Kansa professed not to remark this—she had seen all she needed to see in the lines of the hand—and Monica's action, added to this and to Madame de Kansa's general knowledge of her, had told all the rest.

"Yes, but not in the way you imagine. There is no more latent, immoral impulse in your nature than in that of any other healthy, normal individual. In the majority of cases evil action is the result of strong temptation and the passions of the moment. I see nothing in your hand to warrant you in the assumption of hampering inherited predispositions. No, madame, the handicap I speak of consists in the way you have taken yourself. Forget the shadows of the past, cultivate tolerance, that sweeter side which comes from letting the heart have its way, be what you would naturally be had not you been warped by the harshness imposed on your feelings and youth. That is my counsel to you, madame."

Her voice was kind, and she put out her hand to her visitor. Monica, who had risen, took it, but rather quickly withdrew her own. She suspected Madame de Kansa had recognized her. It offended her pride.

Yet Monica could not tear herself away.

"If you don't believe in heredity," she said, "then you don't believe in fate. And what becomes of your science?"

"The lines in our palm are the map given us by God to gauge our characteristics and possibilities."

And Madame de Kansa smiled her confident professional smile. "When a country's geographical conformation changes, wise men change the map; when our character changes, a wise God changes our map for us. I tell you that there are in your life no evil influences save those of surroundings and imagination. I tell you what you are and can be. If you choose to make yourself different, it is not my fault, any more than that of your ancestors."

Convinced now that the seeress knew who she was, Monica risked forcing an issue.

"Suppose I had an ancestor who committed a crime? It could not affect me?"

"Do you assume yourself as born before or after the crime?" Madame de Kansa demanded.

"Oh, long, long after."

"Ah, might it date back a generation or two? In that case, was your father or mother—or whoever it was—born before or after the crime?"

"Before," Monica answered impatiently, wondering why she lost time in such futile word-play.

"Why, then, are you talking of heredity?" Madame de Kansa asked, as if in pity for such ignorance. "The lesion in a criminal's brain formed after he has committed the act might be transmitted to his offspring, conceived subsequently. As to children born before the act, they cannot be affected save by example and propinquity, as adopted children or neighbours' children might be—by the force of suggestion."

" Suggestion ? "

" Certainly. You remember the story of the haunted sentry-box during the Franco-Prussian War? Camille Flammarion was the first to explain it logically. There was no reason for all those suicides except that one soldier happened to make away with himself for reasons of his own, and his comrades were fascinated by the morbid associations of the nail on which he had hanged himself in the lonely silence of the wintry night."

" But . . . what connection could there be between suggestion and hands? " Monica asked after a pause.

" The susceptibility of the person would be marked; and the effects produced by suggestion if indulged in. Both of these markings would disappear if the tendencies were courageously fought and conquered."

" Ah! Even after—after a crime was committed? "

" Even then, yes, there would be a change noticeable. As example of that, I keep in my waiting-room two casts of the hand of a noted criminal who died almost a saint—the Marquise de Brinvilliers." Madame de Kansa saw Monica's surprise, and she continued smoothly: " You did not know that her repentance and expiation are said to have been beautiful? Why, when she was publicly burned on the Place de Grève, and her ashes were scattered to the winds, bits of bone were picked up by the populace and kept as relics because of her saintliness after her terrible crimes! I have her hands when she was arrested, and again just

before her death. The differences might be evident only to scientists; to us they are full of eloquence."

"Which did I see?" Monica breathed almost inaudibly.

"I hope you saw both if you saw either—it is in their contrast that they have their eloquence," Madame de Kansa answered. "You surely did not think it part of her criminal nature to be afflicted with two right hands, did you? Only a pupil of Lombroso would think that!"

"I—I'm afraid I did not notice very closely," said Monica.

"All the better for you. That is part of the intellectual commonsense with which I see you are gifted. Palmistry ought to be studied deeply as one of the most important as well as most complicated of sciences, or else left entirely alone. Its half-knowledge is a real danger by leading to deductions often diametrically opposed to the truth."

As Monica hesitated, Madame de Kansa opened the door for her and closed it quickly behind her. She knew that the seeds she had sown in her client's mind would bear the most useful fruit if allowed to germinate in the darkness of meditation. She rejoiced that Monica had been sufficiently stirred to forget the payment of the fee: it would have galled her to take money from the daughter of a friend and benefactress, yet she knew that an argument would disturb the psychic currents which she had exerted so much effort

to create. She mused that if Monica forgot the fee, all would go well. And Monica must have forgotten, for she did not return.

* * * * *

Monica had not collected herself when she was roused by seeing that she stood in the waiting-room and was already succeeded by another client in Madame de Kansa's study. There were further questions she would have liked to ask; but since that was impossible, she went once more to the table and looked at the hands of the Marquise de Brinvilliers. Even attentive examination showed but few differences, only the fact that there should be differences, and that both Julian and herself had, in their ignorance, presumed upon cursory glances, filled her with a sort of scorn for him and for herself. Only it was the scorn for him which predominated; after all, was it not he who had "suggested" her?

She started to walk back to Elsie Fitzgerald's apartment in the Avenue Victor Hugo. It was not far, but she failed to count on physical reaction from her consultation with Madame de Kansa. It had taken a good deal of resolution to go, and she felt exhausted now. As she passed in front of St. Honoré d'Eylau she hesitated, then went in. It was an hour when the church would be deserted, and she wanted a place in which not only to rest but to think. Seeking a quiet corner, she took a seat and closed her eyes for a moment. It

was not in prayer, for she was not given to praying. It was merely to shut out objective things a moment for the sheer physical relief of it. She had the strength to face life, but she had faced it so long!

She enjoyed her sense of refuge from external things. There was something curiously grateful just then in the calm surroundings, which gradually began to communicate its spirit and left her able to formulate her thoughts.

First, came rebellion against Julian and all that their married life had meant. She had never wanted to marry him; from the very start she had felt too keenly his weakness in principles, whatever might be his strength as a man. His facility in arranging with his conscience the fact of opening that letter of hers when she had telegraphed to him to destroy it, ought to have given her sufficient warning; such conduct as the equivocation over the manuscript was a mere logical consequence.

Tragically strange, that coincidence between his fiction in *The Labyrinth of Life* and the fate of her own poor baby. The grimness of the coincidence had horrified her before; it was only now that the prophetic quality impressed her. How had Julian known that it would be so? She hated him the more for knowing. Then that other coincidence between her hands and those of the Marquise de Brinvilliers—her hands which Julian had once admired, and in which she herself had taken a certain pride, for they were always spoken of as beautiful. Julian had noted that resem-

blance before she had—though details of saving difference had escaped him. And she had struggled so hard, so hard, against all that heredity might mean—that such hands might mean—only to be treated as a would-be murderess!

A fresh thrill of terror shot through her. She had grown accustomed to the thought of her husband's infamy in suspecting her; a new perspective had opened before her now. Why had she so struggled if she did not believe in heredity—why had she so feared the extravagant tendencies which had driven Mrs. Perdoe to crime, that she had renounced her fortune in order to conquer her own vain tendencies? Was it indeed "suggestion"—or was it that she believed the Perdoe blood in her veins would contaminate her? She recalled her feelings of helpless fury as she read Harding's development of the subject in *The Labyrinth of Life*—the memory was still so hideous that she cowered before it. She had said that it was for the sake of others she wanted the manuscript destroyed. Suppose it had, after all, been for herself? Then there, again, Julian would have been right in accusing her of sophistry.

Resentment against him was now the dominant chord in her nature. Instead of living, she had tried to make him live, and he had only been playing with her, mocking her, the while. For the first time, she succeeded in conquering the pang caused her by the thought of her baby. For the first time she really felt what she had said in her burst of passion: it was best little Julian had died. He would have grown up not

only to read *The Labyrinth of Life*, but to know his father.

For Monica herself, at least, there remained the chance to live and grow, now she was delivered from Harding. She would bury the past, with her poor little babe, and leave aside her mourning for both, since she now accepted the loss of the child and asked but to forget the lost husband. She would listen to Madame de Kansa, would experiment to see if she could live normally, would give her woman's nature a chance. She still had her art; and then there were her charities, which she had neglected under the pre-occupations of marriage and maternity. After all, the philosophy of life by which she had sought to govern herself, had been puzzled out by her while she was yet a girl; there were other sides to study. Perhaps she even began to suspect how many people talk of Pure Reason but spell their Kant with a C.

As she passed out of the church, a wretched-looking mendicant asked for a dole. She had always been very tender to misery and suffering; she had dreamed of doing something worth while with the little fortune which was to have been hers. She now felt for her purse. As she did so, the gleam of her wedding-ring caught her eye. What worthier purpose could this meaningless emblem serve than to buy bread? She slipped it off and dropped it in the woman's palm.

CHAPTER XIII

MISS VANDERHURST was crossing in the Dover-Calais boat. She had not been in Paris for a long time, that is, long for her, who was always everywhere in that constant shift of environment which had become her mania. Paris had, indeed, less attraction now that dear Lena was dead; she missed her, regretted that at the news of her sudden end she had been confined to bed with an attack of *grippe* and had been unable to attend the funeral. She had written to both Monica and Harding at the time, and since corresponded at somewhat long intervals with the latter; but his letters had not been satisfactory, and she sometimes speculated on the outcome of his marriage with her friend's daughter. Their removal from the Neuilly house, followed by the Eversley sale at the Hotel Drouot, had caused her some uneasy speculation as to the amount of prudence Lena had shown in the management of her affairs. Yes, she feared Lena had been extravagant, and she was sorry, for she felt herself responsible in a way for Monica's marriage and would like to feel that the two had been left comfortably off. Lena's letters during the latter's stay with her had somewhat relieved her mind as to the compatibility of the pair . . . they seemed so happy and devoted to each other, Lena had constantly assured her. Yet the experienced spinster

had some doubts of the entire accuracy of the statement, and one of her reasons for going to Paris was to find out the truth for herself. She had written of her intended visit and had been a little wounded that her letter had received no reply.

She was, therefore, not sorry to discover Percy Colston among her fellow passengers. There were many things she had to overlook in deciding to make her presence known to him. But she had learned to forgive a good deal in people, and in ignoring reasons for not being quite gracious, she was moved to learn from him something about the Hardings. The poet seemed oblivious of everybody, as he leaned against the rail. She fancied that perhaps he was a little sea-sick, although it chanced that for once the Channel was calm. Percy was far less calm than the Channel, as she immediately learned on addressing him. He was not sea-sick, but soul-sick.

"Chicot is dead!" he said in a shrill voice of tragedy, and Miss Vanderhurst concernedly offered him her salts, as his tears threatened to end in hysterics. He had received a cable from Buttercup informing him of the loss, and he had wildly taken the first boat back to Paris. He had only delayed long enough to change the order to his tailor from clothes of the latest Bond Street hues and checks to a complete set of mourning attire. He informed the spinster that he meant to mourn Chicot as he never would have mourned Buttercup, had a more accommodating Providence snatched her from him instead. As she listened to this denun-

ciation of Hiram Baxter's daughter, and remembered her flamboyant attire and accent, she privately rejoiced that it was Percy, for whom she did not care, and not Julian Harding, for whom she had her little sentiment, who had committed this marital identification with the tea-trade. She was not one of those spinsters who hail a teapot as though it were an angel from heaven. She liked riches that came, as her own income did, from real estate investment made a hundred years before. She liked her bonds to have a dignified background. But she was a little alarmed, and quite forgot her meditations on Surpassing Ceylon, as Percy, who was anything but reticent and who preferred picturesque fiction to uninteresting truth, sketched a most melodramatic case of domestic scandal in which Julian Harding out-Lotharioed any of Byron's heroes. The light in which Harding figured in Percy's eyes at the present juncture, as the boat bore the agitated poet and the spinster towards the French shore, did credit to his capacity for vengeance; and he was not only avenging himself, he was avenging Chicot.

Miss Vanderhurst duly received, like most of Paris social and artistic who amounted to anything in the poet's opinion, one of the huge black-bordered envelopes issued from the Colstons' stately Avenue du Bois de Boulogne mansion. The recipients, besides being informed of Chicot's demise, were requested to pray for his soul. Those who believed in canine souls may have breathed a prayer or two. Miss Vanderhurst was not

one of these, but like many others she sent a floral offering. She did not, however, accept the invitation to the funeral. Afterwards, she half wished she had. It was described as a very beautiful affair, although it had a rather disconcerting termination. The spinster had her taste for unexpected dramas—as long as she was not concerned in them herself.

The floral tributes were really very numerous: Chicot was as well known in Paris as his master, whom he accompanied to teas, receptions and dinner parties, and anywhere and everywhere his master went. It was the modern version of Mary and her Lamb. Most people were moved, under the circumstances, to forgive the poet his quarrels with them and the little songs they inspired—and they were particularly unpleasant little songs: roses that smelt sweet in a way, but had a bee's sting between the petals. Fernet stammered something appropriate when he met Percy, and Circour, who had threatened to break the poet's head as he in artist fury had broken his bust of Buttercup, promised to reproduce Chicot in marble for the next salon. Mademoiselle Dolores Lagrange, lately returned from lifting the veil of Isis in the land of her former incarnation, sent a bunch of blue lotus; Percy had told her that he didn't wonder she slept in a mummy case, that both should be in a museum; so it was sweet of the Mystic Dolores to forget her grievance. After all, time had only just *begun* to embalm her.

At the funeral, Percy in his black clothes looked very poetical. He suggested to many gathered at the house

the beau ideal of a Hamlet. He stood pointedly apart from Buttercup, and what glances were not directed to where, on a point-lace pillow, Chicot's inanimate body lay, surrounded with flowers and lighted tapers, were witheringly cast at that lady, who did not at all profess to share her husband's grief. She was dressed, as usual, in colours, and Buttercup's colours were never subdued shades. Some thought that she showed extraordinary hard-heartedness, but they were not aware of the vituperations which had hardened her, more than she was hardened already, since Percy's return. Grief had not robbed the latter's tongue of its talents, and Buttercup's replies were not of the order that turn away wrath. The only peace, in truth, that the house had boasted dwelt in the great-gilded salon where Chicot was stretched on his bier.

It was in the midst of the funeral pomps. The Armenian actor, who had once been a *protégé* of Mrs. Eversley's and had several times held her hand, was reading a long elegiac poem he had composed in Chicot's honour. Its description of his pet's touching ways was causing Percy's tears to flow again, when a loud voice—particularly harsh in its competition with the actor's mellifluence—was heard outside. Both Percy and Buttercup knew that voice, and their eyes met. In Buttercup's was anxiety, in Percy's terror. The servant at the door had probably his instinct, but he was powerless, it appeared, to check the entry of the new arrivals. There was a general stir as the pair made their way into the circle. It was, of course, Miss

Zenobia and Hiram. Everybody had met Miss Zenobia; she advanced with her sunbursts and her love string. it was evident there was more love on that string, which had grown like the lady's waist, than in the glance she cast at the trembling Percy. And as for her companion, who could doubt it was Hiram? His sideburns, so oft described by the poet in appreciative drawing-rooms, gave him away.

The pair were not looked for, that was clear. Their appearance had all the unexpectedness of the Ancient Mariner at the wedding feast. If Miss Zenobia's gems glittered, so did Hiram's eyes. In that respect he filled the rôle of the Ancient Mariner quite as well as the Armenian actor would have done. He advanced with a free step, taking in, in one contemptuous survey, Chicot, the lighted candles, the heaping flowers.

Buttercup advanced to embrace her relatives. She was proud of her father, and did not at all question his sideburns, but she sometimes deprecated his abrupt ways and would have greatly preferred if he had arrived at a less inopportune moment. Funerals were after all funerals, even if they were only canine obsequies, and there were many fashionable mourners in the salon. She understood what had brought Hiram; it was her recent letters of complaint. But she made the most of it all and preserved her best duchess manner of greeting.

"Just wait until they leave the house," she whispered into his large commercial ear. "The procession will soon start up."

"Yes, I reckon it will," he said grimly. "It's going to start up right away now."

The Armenian actor had acquiesced already to that decision. He had deposited his manuscript in his breast pocket. It was a signal for the undertaker and his mates to lay hands on the coffin, which they bore forth-with out of the salon and on to the waiting hearse. The others followed—perhaps a little more hastily than was in keeping with such ceremonies. Buttercup still smiled bravely, as she remained by her relative's side. Miss Zenobia had indulged in one audible contemptuous sniff at the sight of these unseemly mock-Christian ceremonies. She considered that Hiram had shown a magnificent command of his righteous indignation. Percy was the last to fall into the procession. Only the sight of his dog being borne away to the final resting-place seemed to inspire his muscles with life.

As he passed Hiram, the latter laid a hand on his coat collar. Percy shrank a little, but his dignity did not wholly desert him. "Respect the sacredness of grief if you can respect nothing else!" he exclaimed.

Hiram released his hold.

"Well, I guess the best thing you can do *is* to follow your dog," he snarled. "If he hasn't a soul to be damned to hell, you have, anyway."

Paris learned only much later of the dreadful incidents which occurred when Percy returned to what had been his gilded home. The truth came out in the Baxter-Colston divorce suit and the quarrel over settlements—the greatest quarrel the poet had ever had

among his myriads. But Percy was not inspired to make a little song out of it, for he lost his case. The French have some peculiar views in regard to women, but they will not admit the principle of wife-beating, and it being established that Percy knocked his wife down and broke her arm, the plea of insane grief over the death of his dog merely made the Court smile, and Mr. Hiram Baxter was judged leniently for wiping up the floors with Percy better than they had ever been wiped by the highly-paid servants. Buttercup got her divorce, and Hiram escaped the payment of alimony; he had made wise inquiries, and had chosen for the case a tribunal and a judge notorious for gallantry in never refusing favourable verdicts to women—providing they were very wealthy Americans.

Sheer sentiment, and the longing for a sympathetic artist-soul, led Percy to mend his breach with Circour, whose "Sleeping Chicot" for the tomb at the Dog Cemetery became one of the attractions of the place. But what struck most was Percy's legend:

" The more I see of she-cats,
The more I love my he-dog."

Miss Vanderhurst, passing there, recognized the corrected Pascal, and reflected that while Percy had been worsted by Hiram he possessed a woman's talent for the last word. " But, then," she added, " Percy always had a woman's tongue."

CHAPTER XIV

TOWARDS the end of August Nicolls was motoring through Chartres to attend an international speed trial on one of the magnificent roads in the neighbourhood. He had timed his arrival in the old Cathedral town so that his machine might cool off and be put in perfect trim before the trial began, and meanwhile he had planned to see once more certain details of the town's architecture, outside of the Cathedral, which he already knew thoroughly. Entering the Church of St. Pierre, he came presently before the wonderful enamels of Limousin, and was surprised to recognize Monica in a lady he had noticed at work there. His surprise was, indeed, twofold; first, because he had no reason whatever to expect her there, and then, because she, who had formerly affected such sober hues, was now clad in a dress whose glowing harmonies of colour vied with those of the enamels.

"Mrs. Harding! I had no idea you were at Chartres," he exclaimed. "I was thinking of you only yesterday morning."

"If you thought of me here before the afternoon, you were very much out," she returned with a lightness which gave him a third cause for surprise, though her dress ought to have prepared him. For the first time since he had been told her story, he thought of

her not as Mrs. Perdoe's granddaughter, but as Mrs. Eversley's daughter.

He did not know quite how to continue their talk, as Monica paused.

"You are copying these?" he ventured. "Interesting work—but it must be taxing. You look a little tired."

"Tired from heat coming in the train, then," she laughed. "I came from Paris yesterday to make some fresh comparisons about the colours. I told you of this order from the Arundel Society—yes, it was long ago, and it ought to have been done; but I wasn't altogether pleased with some of the tones I got, and I did two of the plates completely over."

"Though not an artist myself, I always admire artistic conscientiousness," Nicolls remarked. He saw her send him a startled look, and knew that she suspected an allusion to Harding and the manuscripts. He added hastily: "My motor's just round the corner. A little air would do you good. I am sure you have worked enough for to-day. Let me take your things."

"I should prefer walking to motoring, if you don't mind. I have been sketching the cathedral from that pretty point over there, as a relief from the two much Apostles. I like being out-of-doors, and it isn't unpleasant to-day." She spoke a little hurriedly, and with apparent desire to keep the conversation impersonal. He understood that her refusal to enter the motor was due to some delicacy of feeling.

He took her sketching kit, and walked by her side.

"I went to see Miss Fitzgerald," he said, breaking the silence, "after going to your apartment and finding you had left. I knew she would probably have your address, but she refused to give it to me. She said it was your wish. Was that quite friendly?"

"It did not seem so, I admit. But I did not mean it for unkindness. I had my reasons."

"Yes, I understand that," he answered. "Your husband has been with me this summer out at St. Germain."

"He is with you?" And her voice faltered a little.

"Yes, he is much better—in fact, almost himself again. I am glad of this chance meeting," he went on, "for it gives me the opportunity I have long wanted to talk to you. It is about Julian, as I needn't say. I know you will forgive me the liberty I take as an old friend. Besides, we have always understood each other so well, and that gives me confidence in touching on a delicate matter. You will not be offended?"

"You cannot offend me by speaking of Julian," she answered.

"Naturally, he has suffered from what happened," Nicolls resumed. "But his nature has revenged itself in a consuming passion for work. I had trouble in forcing him to rest, even for a few days, to recover his balance after the shock of his adventure with the salamander and then the grief of finding you had left him. Of course, he wasn't responsible for anything he said that night; he looks back on it now as a sort of blurred nightmare, and I know that you are too sensible

to have taken him very seriously even if he was grossly unjust. Circumstances had been leading up to a climax between you, and when the moment came anything sufficed. You forgive my frankness as a very old friend, don't you? "

His casual tone made it comparatively easy for her to answer:

" There was no other solution—we had to part. You see, the one mistake nothing would mend was our marriage." She turned her eyes towards a sunny stretch of landscape which appeared in a gap between the wal's of two old houses.

He reverted quickly to the theme of Harding's work.

" First of all, you must know that he sent *The Labyrinth of Life* to another publisher and got it enthusiastically accepted. Now he's got enthusiastic himself, has revised it carefully, has learned to know his characters better, has cut out some of his treatises to serve later as pamphlets on medicine or metaphysics or he isn't quite sure what, and he has discovered that the circumstances seemed inevitably tragic only because he as their unkind godfather wanted to make them so. Disquisitions on heredity have fallen to insignificance when actually forced down into the ring and made to fight with human passions."

Slowly and deliberately, she pressed her under-lip against the edge of her upper teeth and drew it down again—a characteristic action when she was displeased. Nicolls went on:

" Then he has finished his new story, too—the one

he wrote for you. He sent that to Bentley, who now threatens to sue either him or the publisher of *The Labyrinth of Life* if the latter appears within six months of the Bentley book. That incident has done Harding a world of good—to have publishers actually squabbling over him, as he calls it; and he's so annoyed with Bentley that he is delighted at the prospect of setting the two firms by the ears."

She spoke at last, dryly:

"So you have been able to do for him what I never could?"

"It was not I; it was events," Nicolls answered. "I did nothing beyond persuading him to go out to the country where he could work quietly."

"I asked him to rest, but he refused to listen to me."

"Yes, but you expected him to be dependent on you the while."

"As though that made any difference!"

"As if it could help making a difference!"

Monica turned her face from him:

"It was I myself who made the difference. My very presence seemed to irritate him; so whatever I did was bound to vex him. The more I tried, the worse it got, until I seemed to be merciful to him in going. And now you—and everybody—will think I deserted him in his need."

"You need not regret that, or anything, Mrs. Harding," Nicolls said intensely. "It was all for the best, believe me."

"For the best? My leaving him?" She spoke

with the quick resentment which showed Nicolls how dangerous it was to take a woman for granted, even when you have her own latest words as basis.

"I only mean that it did him no harm to help himself," he said. "Perhaps it was too much for him, at one time, to try to help himself and you; but it was not enough for his energies to feel no responsibilities whatever."

"All he had to do was to continue being responsible for himself alone, as he was when he insisted on my marrying him," Monica breathed sombrely. "For he did insist; I refused him; I did everything I could to discourage him, even on the very night I was finally weak enough to yield—when he represented how badly he needed my help. I liked to help people. I like helping Elsie Fitzgerald now that she finds Paris is not an artistic place since sheer merit cannot work its way up to starring after one has accepted subordinate parts at the Opéra Comique. I have new views of life, from the simple fact that I *am* useful to some one, though a stranger, after failing with my mother and my husband—and perhaps with myself. Yes, I don't mind acknowledging it, I've had some months to grow accustomed to the changed order of things; I have given up struggling over myself, I am content to live, to *be*. I realize it's all for the best, so far as I am concerned, and if you can say so too, then—Julian—must agree to it."

He understood now what had struck him superficially in the beginning. Her dress was of brilliant blue linen, with a red rose pinned to her breast; a bunch

of roses was in her white tulle hat; a long grey coat with large pearl buttons concealed her toilet only enough to make it attractive. Anyone knowing her less well would have been puzzled by this display; Nicolls saw in it an almost pathetic effort to shake off the shadows of her past life and thought—to live, to *be*, as she expressed it. Her irresponsible mother, her misunderstanding husband, had been associated with sternness in her dress and ways; and now for the first time she was giving free wings to her soul—perhaps believed at last that she had a soul, careless as she had always been about religious matters. Doubtless no other means had come to her for forgetting her baby, and that was a pain which only forgetfulness could assuage. But however that might be, it was evident that she need not forget Harding, to cease caring for him. Nicolls felt he had done what he could for his friend; only the thought of his own lost loves dwelt with him. Lost, of course, eternally buried. But how delightful was this new, quick, direct, resurrected Monica!

“Don’t forget how much you have helped me,” Nicolls said, dwelling on her allusion to Elsie Fitzgerald. “Remember you said you were sure I was able to do without you. I wasn’t at all sure; but I tried, because you made me. And if I succeeded, it was because I remembered your confidence in me. Consciously or unconsciously, you had appealed to my pride, and that’s an important stepping-stone to success. But I don’t deny it was hard—don’t deny it may even seem hard sometimes now.”

They had reached the open country. Broad flat fields stretched away as far as the eye could see beneath the shimmering sun; the silence was broken by the hideous croak of distant automobile horns, but Nicolls had forgotten all about his speed trials.

Her features had softened, and he noticed that she walked with a grace which the olden Monica would have feared to permit herself.

“Consciously or unconsciously, you are now flattering my pride, since I’ve told you I love to help,” she said, with an easy self-mastery which was a further revelation to him. “These helpful people are awful bores without knowing it, aren’t they? And they so often do the exact contrary of what they mean to do. The only thing, I’ve come to believe, is being careful as one goes along, to do the best one can, and then let consequences go; if the causes are all right, the chances are the consequences will be fairly safe. There! I’m at it! I’d vowed to myself that I’d stop preaching! It’s funny how we can’t change our characters, isn’t it?” And she laughed with a tinge of sadness, yet with real spontaneity.

“Your character was never what you pretended it to be,” Nicolls said. He did not suspect that he put passion in his tone, and perhaps she was not entirely aware of it either, but her cheek flushed slightly. Nicolls went on: “You grafted on ways and ideas which never belonged to you, which never did justice to you, which never allowed anybody to understand you except—

except—well, I can't help saying it—except myself. I understand you, Monica."

"I believe you do," she returned, looking away from him again.

The sun suddenly grew intensely hot. The fields seemed to sway and rise up. Breath seemed to leave him: night seemed to come after the dazzling light. But Monica stood out clearly and magnificently amid his bewilderment.

"Monica! Monica!" he cried.

The change that swept her face recalled him to his senses. She thrilled at the sound of her name; then she grew cold and stern as he had never known her in her most forbidding moments.

"My walk is straight along that white road to the right," she said. "The one we can't see the end of, because it is so smooth and straight and open that it sweeps on to the horizon. It's a long walk, and a tiring one, but I know precisely where I am going, and I need no guide. Yours lies through that lane with the hedges, doesn't it? And friends and motors and all sorts of unexpected developments are ahead of you where I should only be in the way. Don't argue the point: these are the cross-roads."

CHAPTER XV

THE Châtelet Theatre was filled with music-lovers for the first Colonne concert of the autumn season. A number of no particular appeal had been played; Richard Strauss's "Death and Transfiguration" now came next on the programme, and the German composer's orchestral work was still sufficiently new in Paris to excite considerable curiosity.

On the silence of the theatre fell the opening bars of "Tod und Verklärung." Harding, who had come especially to hear this, abandoned himself to the extraordinarily moving effects of the Strauss poem, with its architectural, symbolic grandeurs, its bold, fresh beauties of realistic description, its lofty human lesson. He thought this the most soul-searching of all Strauss's tone-pieces he had heard, some of which he knew in his New York days. Under the influence of its panoramic art he lived over his life, from childhood's prologue to the complex drama of manhood. Anon, came the strident "Halt!" of discordant brasses, as they voiced some fresh defeat of human striving. Yet, in answer to the weariness of life, marched the triumphant chords of spiritual vision, transforming defeat into victory. And at last, the climax-music of divine, melting sweetness: mortality transfigured, lifted beyond the wound of failure, the jeer of death.

Such music was, Harding felt, what he most needed at the moment. It imposed, by its power of genius, the larger idea of living which had taken form in him since the mellowness of real success had come to obliterate the harshness of early struggles and of premature success, and also since a real soul-tragedy had come to him after the many which would doubtless have appeared mere casual incidents but for his artistic sensitiveness and conscientiousness. He could at least now tell himself that he had worked and won; it was in living that he had to acknowledge he had lost. But in his depression over the latter thought he noted that the sustaining emotion of the piece might wane, just as his spiritual prospects might cloud under stress of struggle; yet the piece showed, and he began to feel intensely that, after all, the struggle was worth while.

The last chord of the symphony ended in a wild burst of applause. With a movement of relief from the strain of the senses through which he had passed, Harding threw back his head. His eyes chanced to fall on the first balcony. There, with an arrested heart-beat, he saw his wife. She sat on the front row, with Elsie Fitzgerald; unaware of his presence, they leaned forward, their attention directed to the stage where the conductor was bowing acknowledgments to the tribute paid him.

This unexpected sight of Monica, at such a moment, was to Harding like the vision come to Dante, emerged from Purgatory shadow, of Beatrice in bright celestial vesture. It was almost like a miracle wrought by the

music, to set a final seal of meaning on the courageous counsels of its harmonies. Why accept the permanent separation she had imposed upon him by a brief note when he had written begging her forgiveness for the terrible accusation he had brought against her? But, graver than acts, their natures came between them. As Monica appeared there above him, Harding reflected that the physical difference between them symbolized their spiritual separation. He was still so far below her, with only the wish to rise! He had scarcely left hell, she had always dwelt in her heights; and it seemed to him, as he mused, that her very weaknesses, which had at times bridged the distance, were borrowed only for the purpose of meeting him.

He was tempted to go to her, but restrained the impulse. What right had he to force an encounter which could only be painful to her? She had put him out of her heart as a sealed past. It was he who could not forget. The stinging sense of what he had lost had rendered him incapable of joy. He had perhaps not analysed before this feeling of incompleteness; not analysed it correctly, at all events; he had mistaken it for weariness of life. He understood better, now that his sole right consisted in viewing her from afar.

He continued to gaze at her, heedless of the "Spring" by a Russian composer which the orchestra had started to play. What were her thoughts? Had she, too been moved by the Strauss piece, guessed its personal significance? Had she compared this hero with the man she had married, the man whom she had never

known to struggle? He had not seen her for eight months: her face bore the mark of a new and deeper sadness. And yet, her dress was almost frivolous, compared with what he had known her to wear. Monica in a clinging dress of golden brown that really did justice to her splendid form—Monica ripe for life and for love! If a man had been with her Harding would have hated him jealously; but she was only with poor Elsie Fitzgerald, who had lost her voice, and, unfitted by operatic experience for other interests in life, was now dragging her discouraged spirit from theatre to concert and from concert to theatre, trying with Monica's help to get interested in something. Did Monica regret the sacrifice she had made in marrying unhappily? Or was it some later personal preoccupation? Though there might be no apparent grounds for jealousy, Harding clasped his hands together in a despairing pressure as he thought of the woman who had loved him and whose love he had so wantonly killed.

The concert was over. He had heard nothing since the first measures of the Spring piece. He got up, so indifferent to time and effort that he was caught in the crowd and took long to reach the street. At the door, he found that chance had put him beside his wife. Their eyes met. Her hand rose with an impulsive movement: he knew that she had not seen him before, and had been taken off her guard. And he knew, too, that she cared.

He never could remember, afterwards, and never dared ask her, what it was he said that overcame her

quick reaction. He saw her draw back, as if frightened more by herself than by him; then saw her yield with an air of helplessness. Another moment passed in silence; then they were walking across to the little square of the Tour St. Jacques, in unexpressed need of fleeing the crowd.

They took seats on a bench under the shadow of the old Gothic ruin. Harding could not speak, now. He felt that he must, yet feared that one wrong word might be fatal. It was Monica who began, very slowly, but with little of her old precision:

"I suppose you have seen Miss Vanderhurst?" She waited for him to nod, and then went on: "So have I. She represented to me that I ought to see you at least once more. She holds herself responsible for—much that happened, which is absurd; and said we owed something to her in at least meeting once. I am not sorry for this accident. I—I believe I was cowardly about seeing you." The admission came with the air of having been made merely because it was so painful. "I was afraid you might try to argue and prove me wrong in wishing to live alone. Miss Vanderhurst told me this showed I knew I was wrong. But I don't believe you will say so. You must have understood, since you were kind to me—kind, I mean, by not writing again, not trying to see me when you knew how I felt. That is why I am glad we have met. I can thank you for understanding. Our respective futures will be happier so."

"Monica, why should we try to understand each

other? Does anybody ever understand anybody else?" He saw displeasure come to her eyes, and he hastened to make his meaning clear: "We both tried so hard to make each other understand. We knew too little of life to realize that it was enough to *love* each other!"

She stirred uneasily, as if about to rise.

"Let everything go, except the one fact that we never loved as we might have loved, and that we do now!" he pleaded passionately. "You were right to leave me, because I was not fit for you; I trampled out all that was sacred in you; I was to blame for all that happened. But you are too just to refuse me the chance to make atonement—and without you I can't atone."

"You never needed me; why should you need me now?" It was the echo of her old cry.

"I always needed you too much for our good. I used your strength instead of my own. It is only now that I find myself what I ought to have been before I married you. And now you can help me—by letting me help you."

She bowed her head and kept silence.

"Monica, you know you need me!" he said softly and earnestly, drawing closer and taking her hand. She did not resist; indeed, the throbbing of her pulse showed him that he had spoken truer than he thought.

"You say this now, yet you could——" She broke off, as if the idea were too bitter to be put in words.

He interrupted:

"Dearest, don't let's try to unravel the past! Be

sorry for me because I was shattered by overwork and overstrain, and so failed in all my duties; let your pity give me the chance I ask for! And in taking the chance, I promise to put gently by anything which may have puzzled me in you—for I shall remember you made yourself suffer in your girlhood because you thought it right and noble to suffer. What's heredity, what's philosophy, what's vague science or illusive art, when a husband and wife are young and full of courage and have learned to know each other at last? You tried to live before you knew what life was, and I tried to write before I had anything to say. Without suspecting it, we were both echoing other people's thoughts and methods. So you carved out for yourself a life that wasn't a life, and I gathered an easy literary success that wasn't worth the plucking. Then, when the moment came to readjust ourselves, we wanted instead to readjust each other. We've found our balance, now, in suffering silently and alone. But to keep it, we must hold closely together." He paused for an instant, and resumed: "Nicolls told you about *The Labyrinth of Life*. The story seemed hopelessly tragic to us both only because we were so hopelessly tragic ourselves, without knowing it. By appealing to the logic of human emotions instead of the logic of scientific laws, I saved my hero and heroine. And then I saw how simple it would have been to save ourselves. That story has been bound up in our lives so strangely; it was a prophecy of all our misfortunes. And now its tone has evolved to a better, healthier one, I can't help

hoping against hope that it is a prophecy again—but of good augury, this time.”

His pressure on her hand had tightened. She rose abruptly, tearing her hand free. He thought he had lost.

“Why talk more?” he pleaded. “You *feel* it is true!”

She lingered.

“My road seemed so straight and clear!” she sighed. “Why do you try to turn me?”

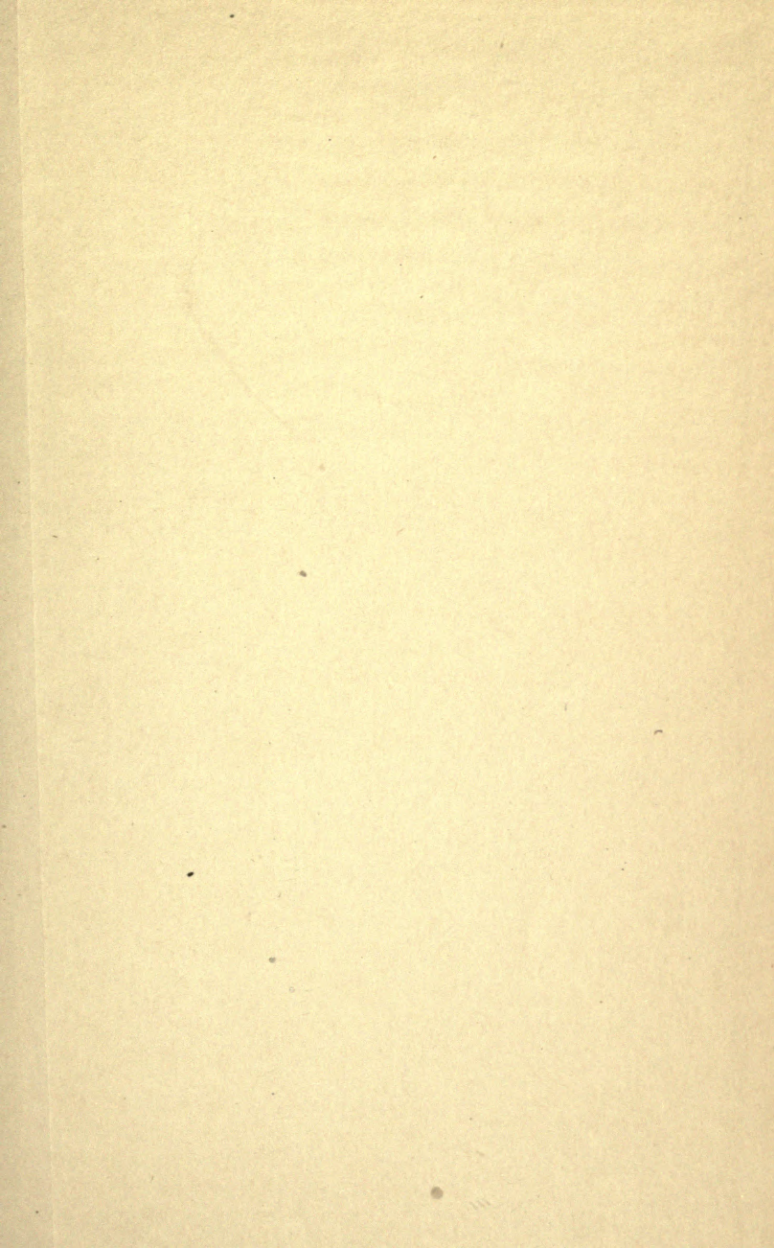
“Because there was no time to lose. Your road led clear and straight to the maze of the labyrinth’s centre; my road is the safe and open one to Life!”

He passed his arm around her waist; she did not attempt resistance. Her breath quickened as she lay there against him, passive and content; and after a moment he kissed her, heedless of the idlers in the square, who, however, like the old tower guarding them, had witnessed too many lovers’ partings and meetings to heed this pair.

As Harding had said, their understanding was to come in silence: where the abstractions of science had failed, the voice of nature had convinced.

THE END.

Letchworth: At the Arden Press.





UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY



A 000 128 908 1

